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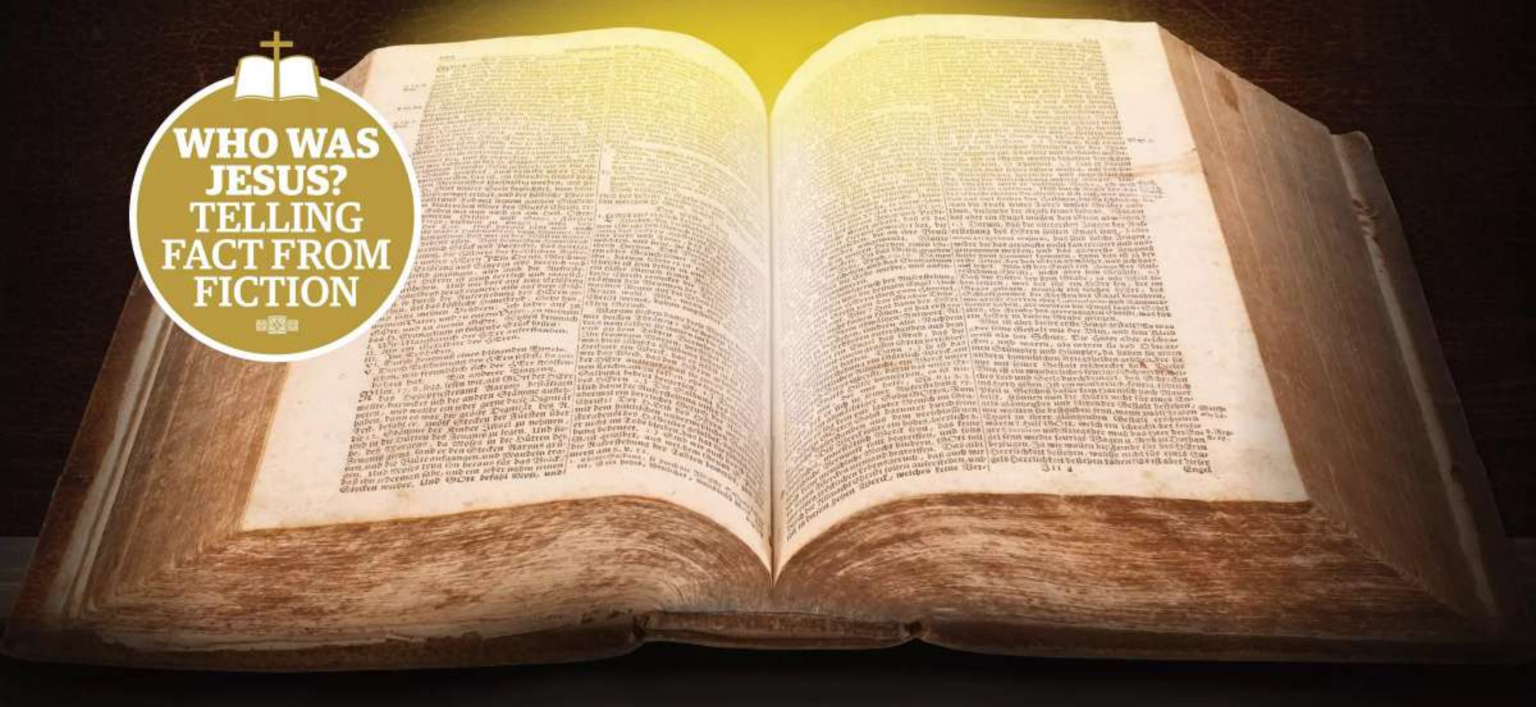
STORY OF THE BIBLE

THE REMARKABLE BOOK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD



WHO WAS JESUS? TELLING FACT FROM FICTION

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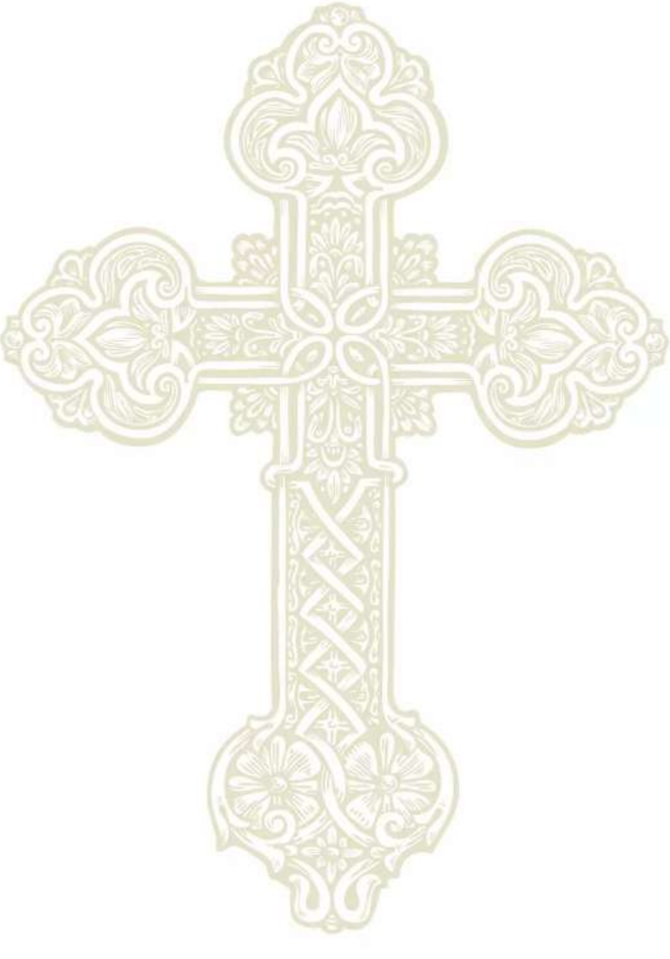
CANONICAL TEXT • HOLY WARS • SECRET GOSPELS



STORY OF THE BIBLE

There is no book in the world that rivals the Bible. Translated in its entirety into over 670 languages, and with an estimated 6 billion copies printed though history, there's no other book that *could* rival the Bible. But what makes this text so popular?

In Story of the Bible, trace the fascinating story of the world's most popular book, from the roots of its stories in history, to its role in contemporary society. Uncover the evolution of this sacred text and find out how the books and Gospels of the Old and New Testaments found their way into the canon. Find out how the word of God has stirred controversy and ignited wars. Elsewhere, we delve into the historicity of the Bible to find out just how much truth lies in the pages.

FUTURE

STORY OF THE BIBLE

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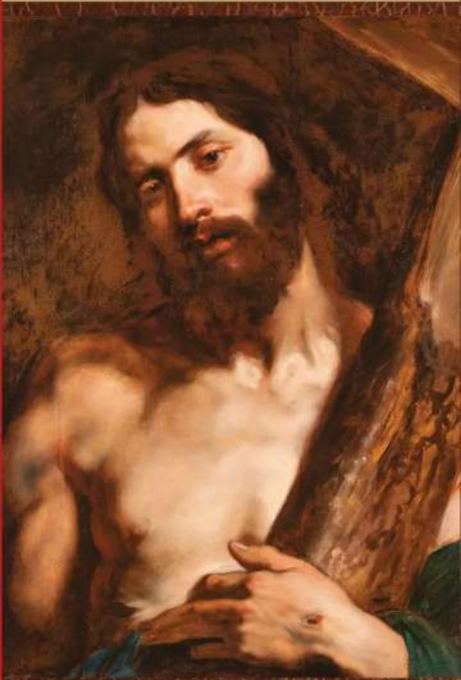

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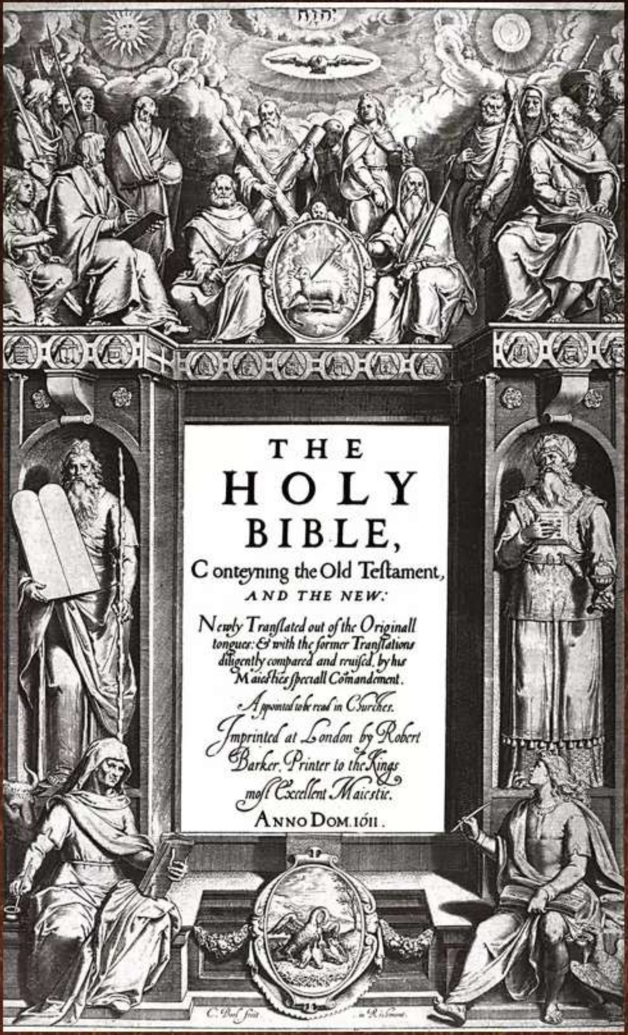

THE
HOLY
BIBLE,
Conteyning the Old Teſtament,
AND THE NEW:
Newly Tranſlated out of the Originall
tongues: & with the former Tranſlations
diligently compared and reuiſed, by his
Maieſties ſpeciall Cōmandement.
Appointed to be read in Churches.
Imprinted at London by Robert
Barker, Printer to the Kings
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ANNO DOM. 1611.

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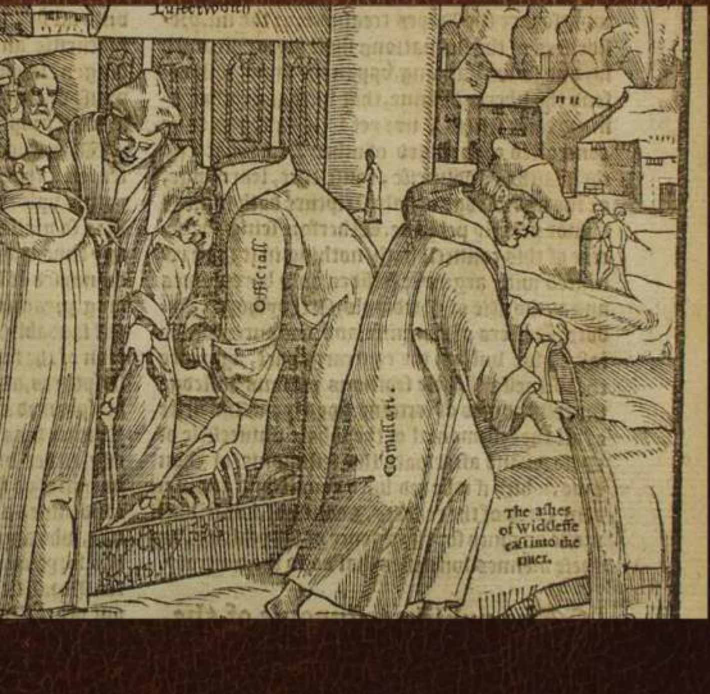
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HOW THE BIBLE CAME INTO BEING

The amalgamation over 1,200 years of 66 sacred writings into the world's best selling book is a reality bordering on the miraculous

Words by Derek Wilson

When we use the word 'Bible' we generally mean the book that is composed of the Old Testament and the New Testament, accepted by the major branches of the Christian Church (though Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox leaders accept as canonical - ie divinely inspired and, therefore, authoritative - a few writings not recognised as such by Protestants). Although the earliest texts were written in the second millennium BCE, some represent stories and information going much further back in time and passed on within the oral traditions of various peoples. They were composed within a geographical area stretching roughly from modern Iran to Italy and embracing the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean littoral. The Old Testament consists of writings created by and revered by the ancient Israelites but also includes material common to other Middle Eastern cultures. The development of written language only occurred when nomadic peoples began to settle, build towns and became aware of national identities. It was in the 12th century BCE that the Israelites settled in Canaan, an area coterminous with modern Palestine though its borders fluctuated considerably over the years due to conflicts with neighbouring nations.

THE ISRAELITE TRADITION

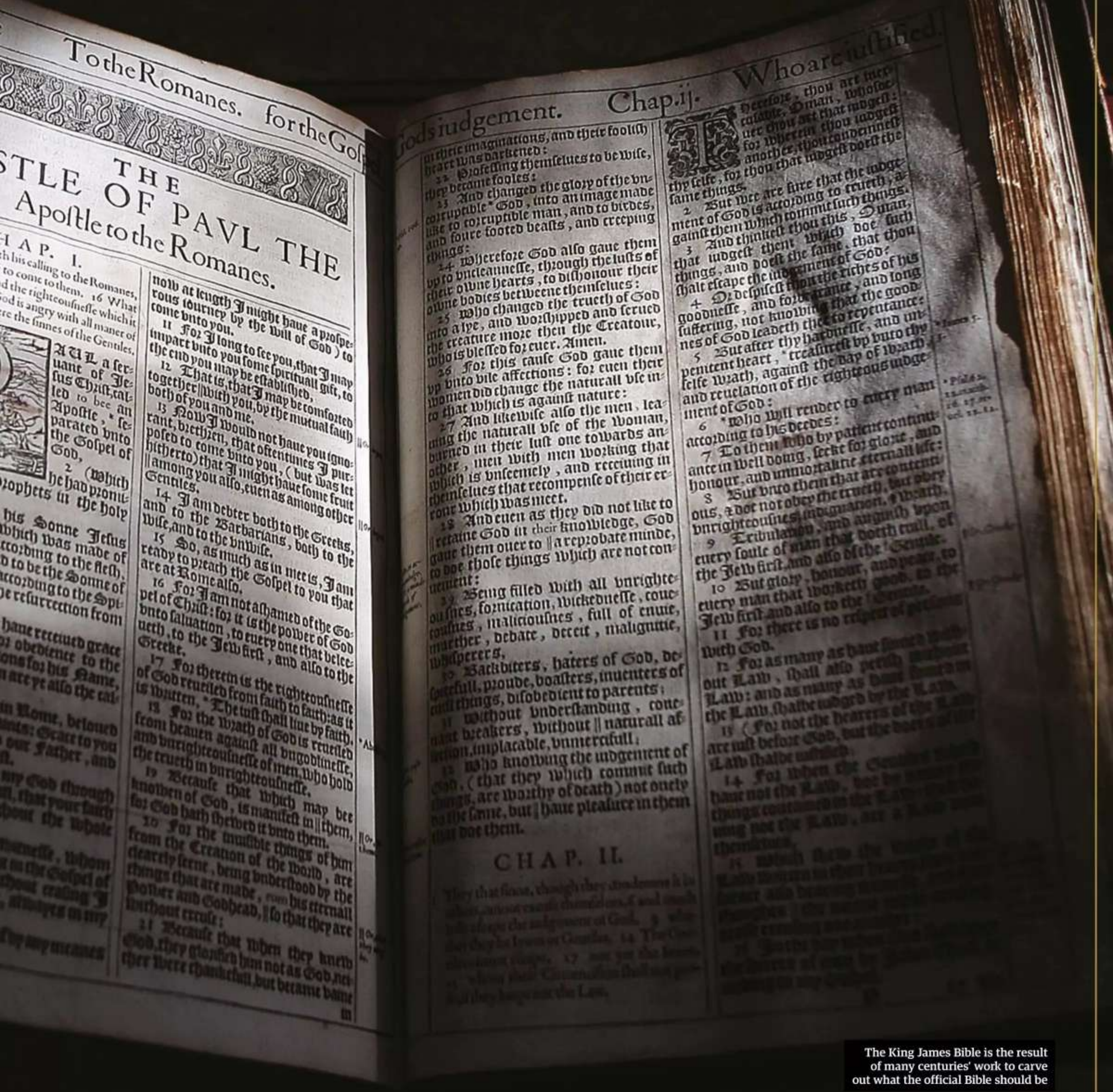
The Israelites formed one element of a large number of tribal societies dwelling in (and frequently competing for control of) what is known as the 'Fertile Crescent'. This territory, stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Nile Valley and incorporating much of modern Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, was, as the name suggests, an area of rich, fertile land, hemmed in by deserts, mountains and seas. It is not that difficult to understand why settlers ended up clashing for control of its natural resources or why great empires - Hittite, Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonia, Assyria, Seleucid, Roman - rose and fell here.

During the prehistoric centuries the varied peoples of the region developed their own stories to explain their understanding of the world and their place in it. These 'foundation myths' narrated the activities of the gods believed to be in control of human destiny - gods to whom their devotees erected huge temples and structures for ritual sacrifice. Although some elements of the biblical narrative (notably the story of the Great Flood) overlap with some of these myths, the Israelite tradition was always very distinctive.

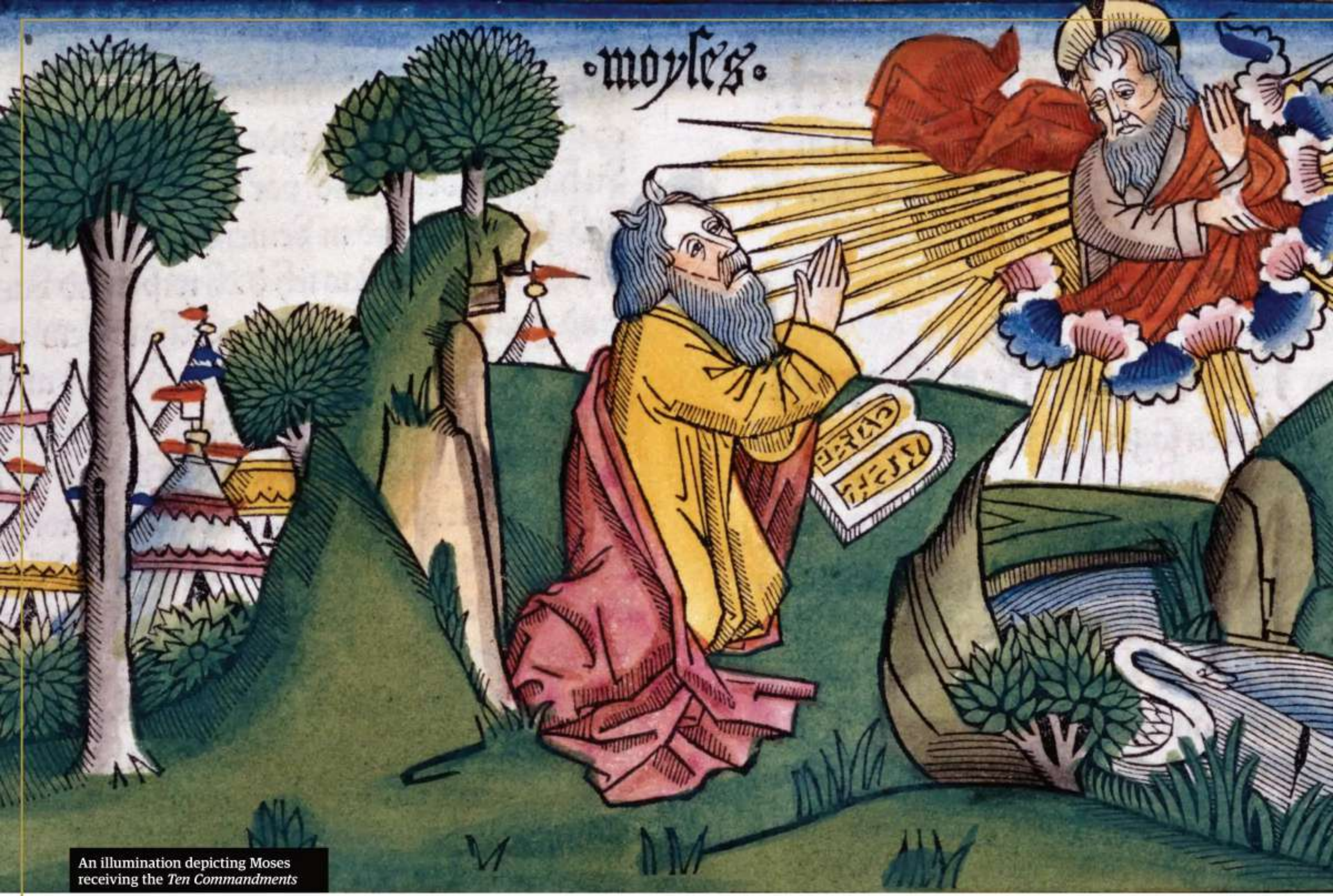
The account of the nation's prehistory, as eventually set down in Genesis, rapidly moved on

Pauls zeale
EPIS

“THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE OCCURRED WHEN NOMADIC PEOPLES SETTLED”



The King James Bible is the result of many centuries' work to carve out what the official Bible should be



An illumination depicting Moses receiving the *Ten Commandments*

"ALTHOUGH JUST ONE AMONG MANY FERTILE CRESCENT TRIBES, THEY CLAIMED A UNIQUE DESTINY"

to the story of the patriarchs, the founding fathers. It began with the travels of Abram, whose family came from the city of Ur on the lower Euphrates at the time (circa 1900 BCE) when the Babylonian Empire was being established. Abram and his people were nomads. They prospered. But although they were just one among many Fertile Crescent tribes, they claimed the promise of a unique destiny. First of all they believed that the God they worshipped was the Supreme Being for all humanity. All the other deities worshipped in the impressive shrines of their neighbours were simply non-existent. Furthermore, God made astonishing promises:

The Lord appeared and said, "I am the Almighty God. Obey me and always do what is right. I will make my covenant with you and give you many descendants... I promise that you will be the ancestor of many nations. Your name will no longer be Abram, but Abraham [possibly Hebrew for 'father of a multitude'], because I am making you the ancestor of many nations. I will give you many descendants, and some of them will be kings. You will have so many descendants that they will become nations... I will give to you and to your descendants this land in which you are now a foreigner. The whole land of Canaan will belong to your descendants for ever, and I will be their God." (Genesis 16, 1-8)

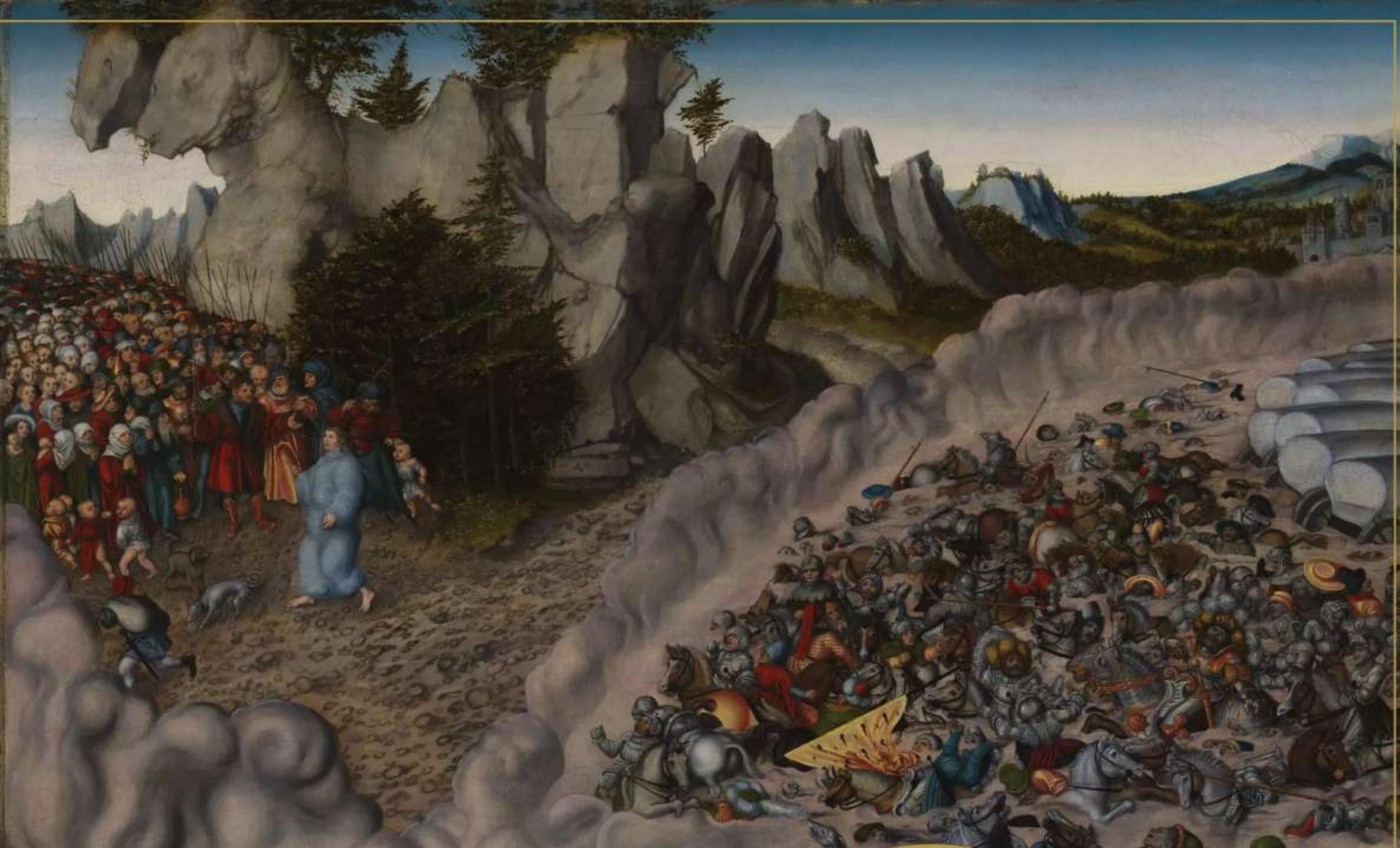
THE GREAT ADVENTURE

It would be 700 years before this prophecy came near to being fulfilled. During those years Abraham's descendants experienced a roller-coaster ride. There were conflicts with neighbouring tribes, internal divisions and, at some point, many of the people were forced by economic hardship to migrate to Egypt. There, according to the Genesis record, they became slaves. Then at some point the 'Great Adventure' began, which would dominate the historiography of the Jewish people right down to the present day. This was the escape of the slaves from Egypt, led by Moses, their wandering around Sinai and Palestine for 40 years, their receiving of the Ten Commandments and their eventual annexation of Canaan, where they settled. All this is recorded in the book Exodus and the first half of the book of Joshua. The writer of the latter recorded the Israelite triumph over all their enemies because, "The Lord kept every one of the promises that he had made to the people of Israel." (Joshua 21.45)

These dramatic events were all passed down orally and different traditions of transference led to slight variations, which appeared in the references that found their way into the written Old Testament documents. The writing of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) is usually dated to the mid-6th century BCE, though some scholars think it could have been earlier. Even if we assume a date as early as the 10th century, that still leaves a gap of 500 years between the writing of the books and the events they describe. The normally accepted date for the Exodus is circa 440 BCE, though scholars differ widely on this. Some question the historicity of the escape from Egypt and archaeological evidence is very scant. However, it is difficult to dismiss as empty legend an event that made such an impact on the lives of the Israelites and their descendants over 3-4,000 years and which is still celebrated by Jews every Passover.

WRITTEN BY THE FINGER OF GOD

Of equal importance to the Exodus story, and intricately bound up with it, is the concept of 'covenant'. This was an agreement made between God and his people involving mutual commitment. In return for God's favour and protection his servants pledged themselves to obey certain conditions. Abraham's side of the deal, recorded in



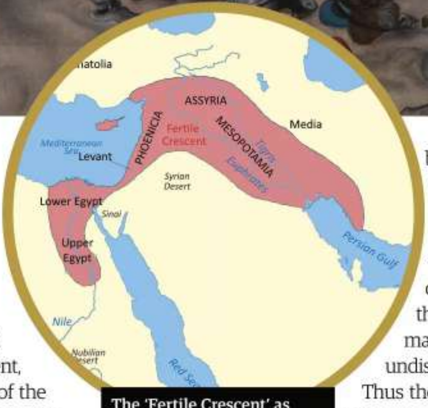
The crossing of the Red Sea, as depicted by Lucas Cranach the Elder

Genesis 16, included the circumcision of every male child. Various covenants were made throughout the Old Testament centuries. Some involved specific actions, as in Abraham's case, but others were broader in scope. The foundation covenant was that delivered to Moses at Mount Sinai (or Horeb) during the Israelites' desert wanderings. The demands required of the people and written on two stone tablets 'by the finger of God' were what we know today as the Ten Commandments. They were general principles that provided the basis of the ethical and religious rules, which were much elaborated on as generations of lawyers sought to employ them in specific cases. Implications of the Divine Law were elucidated in the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which, together with Genesis and Exodus, made up the books of the Law, the Torah.

PROPHETS, POETS AND SAGES

Law has to be written so that it can be clearly understood and appropriately applied. Professional scribes therefore emerged who, not only set down the growing body of law, but also interpreted it. This class of officials was active in the courts of King David and King Solomon (circa 1010-930 BCE). But they were not the only people adding to the collection of Israel's sacred books. Two other categories of religious material were added to the Torah over the centuries - the Prophets and the Writings - which together make up the Old Testament. These were remarkable and unique among ancient religious texts in that they interiorised religion; they made the covenant relationship personal and introduced strands of thought that were, to a significant extent, independent of the cultic life of the nation, controlled by the priests - and sometimes were in opposition to the priests. They challenged the tendency of 'religion' to become formalised and lacking in dynamism. Those writers recorded the history of the people and drew lessons from the nation's rise and fall. They composed psalms for use in worship. They brought direct messages from God. And they reflected philosophically on life and manners. They were prophets, poets and sages and, because what they wrote has a powerful effect on the imagination, it is timeless.

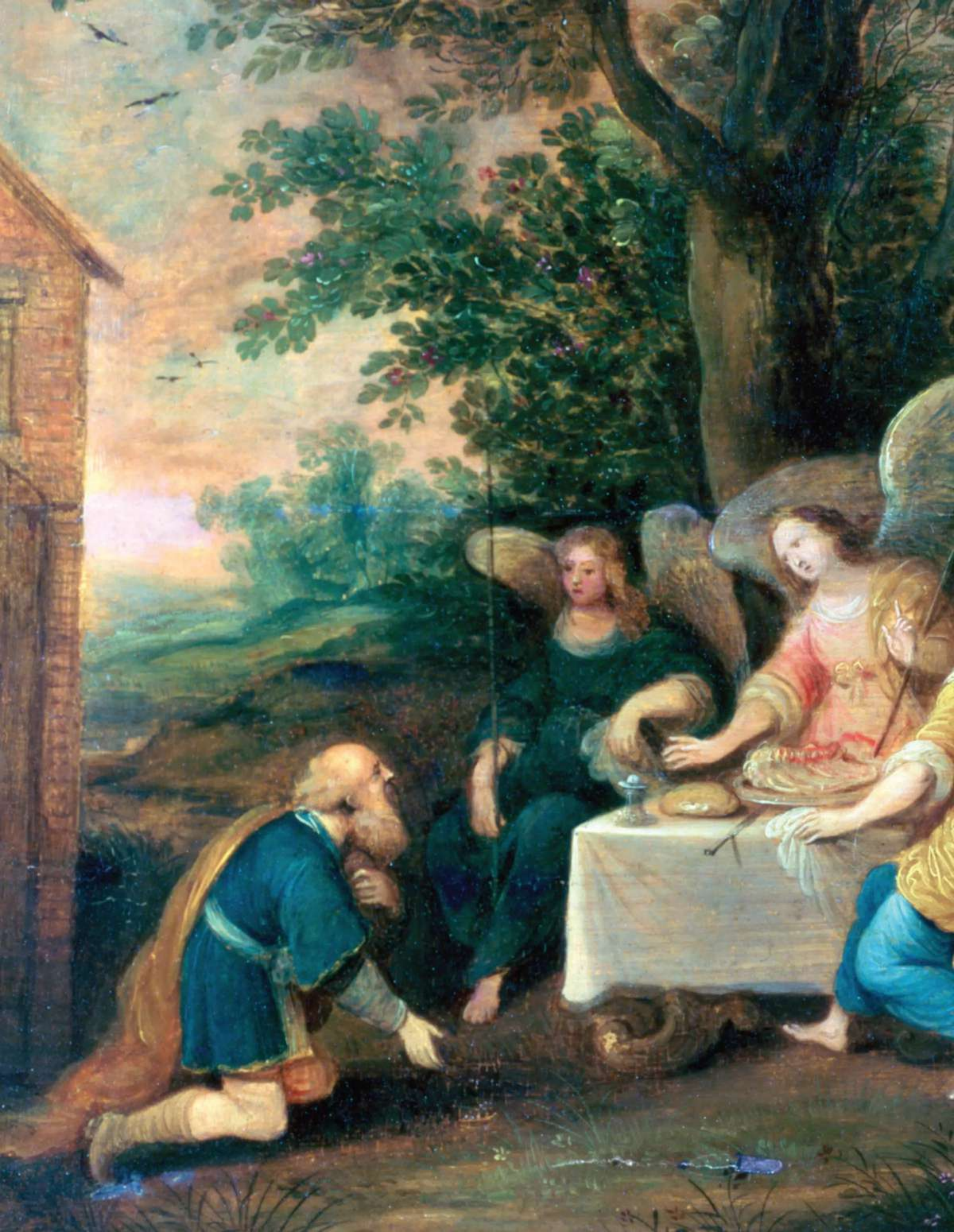
By the end of the Old Testament era the Jews had an extensive library of holy books, not all of which were equally esteemed. In the 3rd century BCE when the Seleucid Empire was at its height, a Greek version of the Old Testament writings - the Septuagint - was composed in Alexandria. It comprised, as well as what we recognise as parts of the Old Testament, other writings later labelled 'Apocrypha'. It was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE that stimulated Jewish scholars to standardise the official scriptures. The dispersion of their compatriots throughout the Mediterranean world made it necessary to have an undisputed orthodox canon. Thus the Old Testament came into being, largely as we know it.



The 'Fertile Crescent' as illustrated on a map

ALL SCRIPTURE IS INSPIRED BY GOD

It was also about the same time that the New Testament came into existence and for much the same reason. Christian churches had sprung up throughout the Roman World and needed instruction in the faith. The first generations of believers only knew from oral tradition about the life of Jesus and the body of doctrine derived from his teaching by the apostles. As the decades slipped by and the numbers of the first disciples who had actually known Jesus dwindled, there was an obvious need for an authoritative corpus of Christian teaching. This was especially so because Christianity was regarded by some as just one of a number of Jewish sects. There were 'Judaizers' who were teaching that Christianity was a matter of keeping the Torah. The new divine revelation had evolved from the old one - but what was the precise



Abraham kneels in front of three angels

"WHAT THESE LETTERS DID NOT PROVIDE… WAS WRITTEN EVIDENCE ABOUT JESUS"

relationship between the two? Saint Paul certainly had the Jewish sacred texts in mind when he wrote;

"The Holy Scriptures… are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instruction for right living." (2 Timothy 3, 15-16.)

Paul and other first-generation theologians were pointing out how Jesus' messiahship had been prophesied by Israel's seers of old. They explained that Christians - Gentiles as well as Jews - were the new covenant people of God, the inheritors of the promise made to Abraham. Unsurprisingly, the first New Testament books were the letters of instruction and encouragement sent by Paul and others to the new churches. The dating of these 'epistles' is much debated but the first were certainly written some 30 years after the time of Jesus' earthly ministry and the last may have been composed towards the end of the 1st century.

But what these letters did not provide, and what believers earnestly wanted, was written evidence about Jesus - who he was, what he did, what he taught and what happened to him. Saint Mark wrote the first biography, probably in the mid 60s CE. Matthew's 'gospel' (a word meaning 'good news') followed shortly after. He was particularly concerned to portray Jesus as the one who perfectly embodied the Law and fulfilled what had been written by the prophets. The third gospel was written by Luke, generally believed to have been a Greek doctor who accompanied Paul on some of his travels. He not only collected information from people who had met Jesus and remembered his teaching, particularly the stories (parables) he told to help his hearers understand his words, but he also continued the story in a second book, the Acts Of The Apostles.

THESE HAVE BEEN WRITTEN SO THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

The Gospel Of John came later - though again the dating is disputed - and is more overtly 'theological'. More than half the book is devoted to the events leading up to and following the crucifixion and resurrection and woven into the story is a reasoned exposition of Jesus ministry for thinking non-believers. The author states that he had selected only a few of the many amazing things Jesus did but, "these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that, through your faith in him you may have life." (John 20, 31.)

The remaining New Testament book has strong links with the Old Testament. It is largely a work of prophecy, similar in tone to the vivid visions of Daniel and Ezekiel. It also harks back to the opening chapters of Genesis. There a paradisal state is described in which God and his human creatures live in perfect harmony. The Revelation to John tells of the return of Jesus, the victory over evil, and God and man once more living together in a perfect environment. The story has come full circle. Revelation dates from late in the 1st century. Tradition has always attributed it to Saint John, the last surviving member of Jesus' inner core of disciples. During a period of Roman persecution John was exiled to the small Aegean island of Patmos, where he had a series of vivid visions of the violent end of the existing world order in preparation for the return of Christ to reign in glory.

By the end of the 1st century the documents just described were circulating in Christian circles, copied by scribes, passed on from person to person and church to church. But they were not the only ones. Like the Jews, Christians had their own apocrypha of theological and devotional writings. This was an age of increasing literacy in the Greco-Roman world and the survival of early biblical texts is testimony to both the importance of the written word to Christians and to the rapid spread of the new religion. For example, there exist about 300 surviving Bible fragments written on papyrus, parchment or vellum from the early Christian centuries, of which the oldest is dated to circa 125 CE. That may not sound very impressive until we compare the statistics with those of other important classical writings. The earliest work of Aristotle (4th century BCE) to have survived can be dated to 850 CE. Virgil's (70-19 BCE) Aeneid is known to us from documents dated to the 3rd century CE. The earliest extant copy of Julius Caesar's (died 44 BCE) Gallic Wars was written 800 years after the original. Bear in mind also that the surviving Christian texts make up only a tiny minority of those that were in daily use in the early churches.

AGREEING SCRIPTURE

The picture we have of the scattered Jewish and Christian communities is of groups treasuring their own collections of sacred texts. It became clear that standardisation was important, not least because various heresies were circulating, some of which drew on unorthodox interpretation. But what was meant by 'orthodox'? The truth could only be safeguarded by agreeing the 'canon' of scripture (ie those writings believed to be authoritative). This was a gradual process and scholars still debate the date when the Old and New Testament canon became fixed. However, we are fairly safe in saying that Jewish authorities had agreed their canon by circa 300 CE, while it was not until Saint Jerome completed his Latin translation, the Vulgate, at the beginning of the 5th century that the western Church had a text largely acceptable to all.

LAYING DOWN THE LAW: THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

Which books deserved a place in the Bible? The question has obsessed Christianity from its earliest times to the present day

Written by Jon Wright

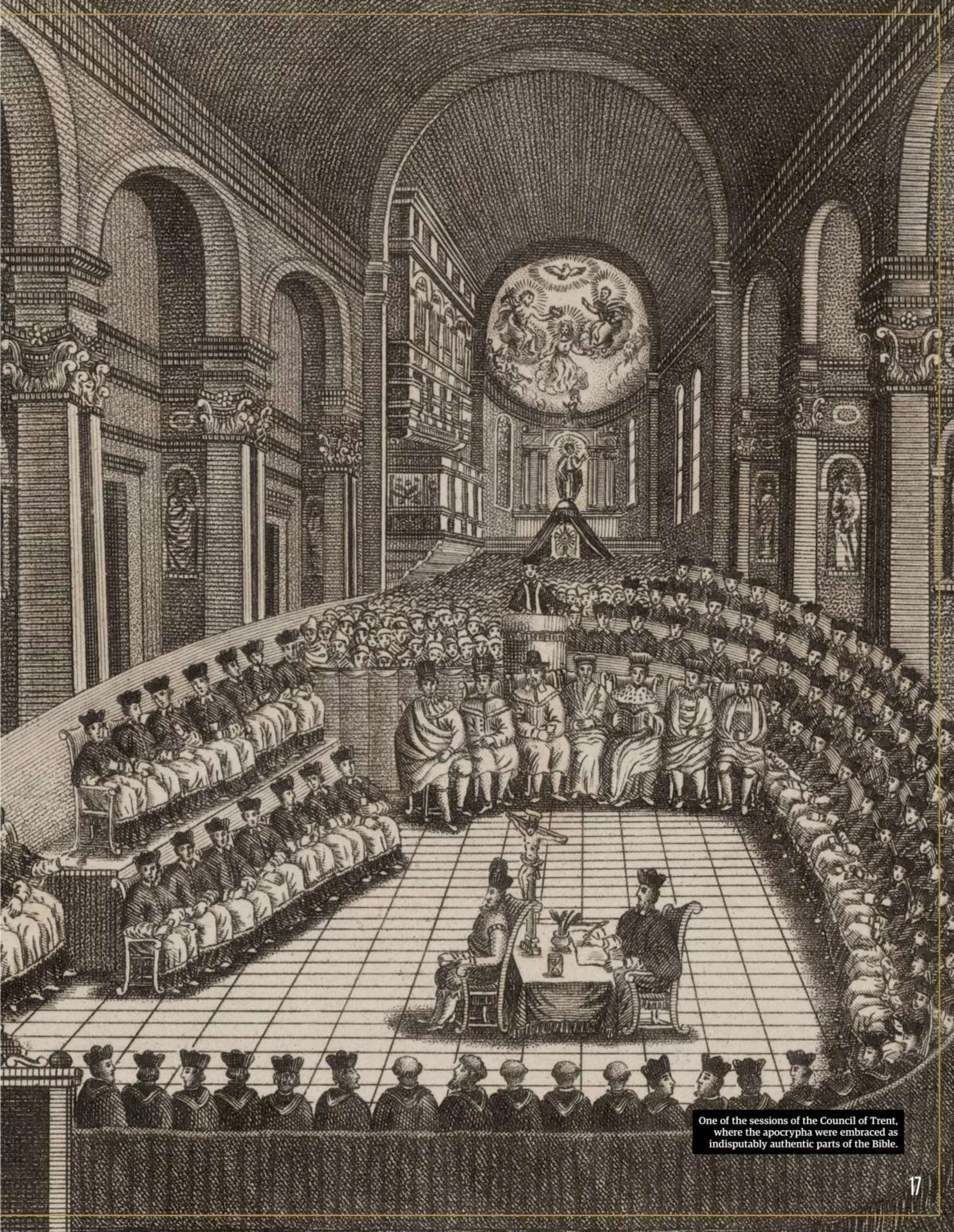
In 1643, with the English Civil War still in its infancy, Parliament ordered the calling of the Westminster Assembly: a synod, of sorts, at which the doctrine and practices of the Church of England were to be reformed and hammered out. The appropriate content of the Bible was, needless to say, of the highest priority. By 1646 the *Westminster Confession Of Faith* had been agreed upon and it emphasised just how crucial it was to identify genuine Holy Writ. "The authority of the Holy Scripture," the *Confession* explained, "depends not upon the testimony of man, or Church, but wholly upon God." As such, it demanded "high and reverent esteem" because of "the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation". How could someone doubt the "entire perfection… whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to the Word of God"?

All of which sounds perfectly straightforward. Choices about what should be included in the Bible would surely be obvious. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth and, by the time the learned delegates gathered at the Westminster Assembly, Christianity had already spent 16 centuries arguing about what truly represented divinely inspired scripture. Prior to that, Judaism had devoted a millennium to a similarly arduous task. Pinning down the canon had never been easy.

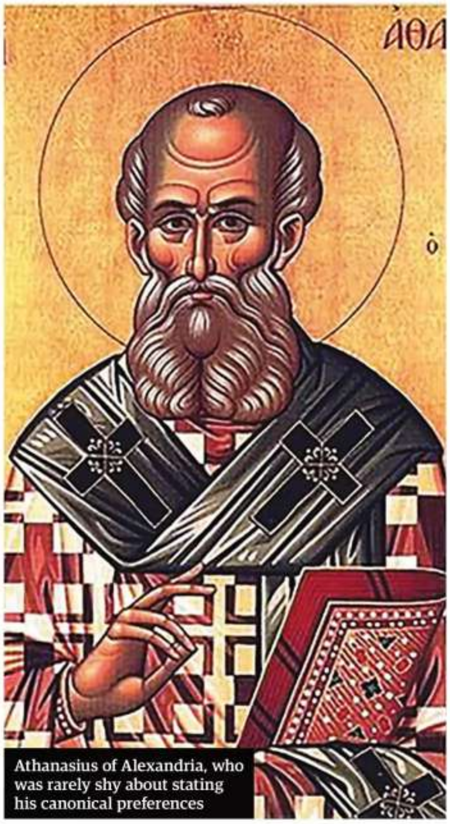
Canon and canonical are words best understood as meaning 'rule' or 'list,' and they derive from a Greek term for a measuring rod. The words did not come into common usage before 4th century CE, but the task of defining the parameters of scripture - what to include and what to reject - had long been underway. The guiding principle was always to distinguish between what was God-given and what was merely the invention of human musing. The codification of the Hebrew scriptures, which would form the basis of the Christian Old Testament, is typically portrayed as developing in three phases. First came the Pentateuch, the Bible's first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It seems likely that they had been fully accepted as canonical by 5th century BCE (interestingly, Deuteronomy may have been the first text to achieve uncontested canonical status). A key role may have been played by Ezra, "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses," who was sent to Jerusalem by a Persian king to ensure full observation of the Torah. Next, came the Prophets, books which were likely seen as fully authentic and authoritative by the 3rd century BCE: these included texts largely concerned with historical accounts - such as Joshua, Judges and Samuel - and the later prophetic books, including Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. The final pieces of the canonical jigsaw were the so-called Writings: poetry and books of wisdom such as Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Chronicles.

The precise chronology of this process is contested. Some place the firm acceptance of the Writings as late as the 1st century CE: other scholars suggest a much earlier date. In any event, by the 1st century CE, the historian Josephus could confidently assert that Judaism accepted a set corpus of scriptural texts: he stated, rather boldly, and erroneously, that for long ages no one had dared "either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable". Judaism, since the establishment of the Masoretic Text between the 7th and 10th centuries, has included 24 books in its canon: this is usually referred to as the Tanakh.

Religious life in the ancient Middle East and throughout the Jewish diaspora was never quite that simple, of course. The Samaritans, who split away from Judaism, claiming that they were the true inheritors of the ancient Israelite tradition, only ever recognised the Pentateuch as canonical. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the status of some solidly canonical books - Ezekiel and Proverbs, for example - was sometimes challenged within the Jewish tradition. It is also abundantly clear that books beyond the mainstream canon were often held in high esteem. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls from the late 1940s onwards was a revelation

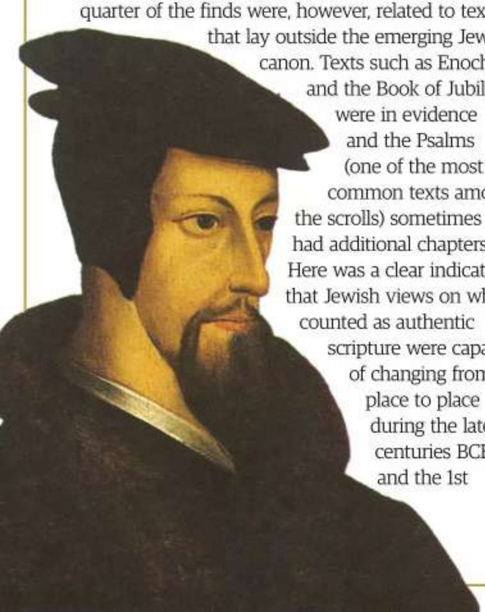


One of the sessions of the Council of Trent, where the apocrypha were embraced as indisputably authentic parts of the Bible.



Athanasius of Alexandria, who was rarely shy about stating his canonical preferences

in this regard. Hundreds of texts - ranging from tiny fragments to entire scrolls - were discovered in caves: the local climate had done an extraordinary job of preserving the artefacts over the centuries and they count among the earliest biblical texts available to scholars. The communities that assembled these texts were an isolated bunch, having rejected the authority of the Jerusalem Jewish community. For all that, many of the works they read and revered had a great deal in common with those prized by the Jewish mainstream: copies of almost all the main books of Hebrew scripture were unearthed. A quarter of the finds were, however, related to texts that lay outside the emerging Jewish canon. Texts such as Enoch and the Book of Jubilees were in evidence and the Psalms (one of the most common texts among the scrolls) sometimes had additional chapters. Here was a clear indication that Jewish views on what counted as authentic scripture were capable of changing from place to place during the late centuries BCE and the 1st century CE. At the precise moment, in fact, when Christianity emerged and had to begin making its own canonical adjudications.



INHERITING THE CANON

The correspondence between the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian Old Testament is obvious. The 24 major books venerated by Judaism are all there in the Christian canon, though the number of books is increased because Christianity divides the book of the 12 minor prophets into separate texts (Malachi, Micah, Zechariah, etc): additionally, some books are split into two parts - 1 Kings and 2 Kings, for example. This does not mean, however, that Christianity simply inherited what scholars call a 'closed' Hebrew canon from the outset. During the Church's first centuries many debates were had about what the Old Testament should contain. It is worth remembering that it took until the 4th century for Christianity to produce an officially sanctioned catalogue of the Old Testament's contents. The impetus for this may well have been the Emperor Constantine's decision to entrust the historian Eusebius with preparing a standardised Bible for use in Constantinople and beyond: definitive choices had to be made about precisely what the Old Testament was. Matters quickly moved on apace. By 350 CE Cyril of Jerusalem was itemising the Old Testament canon, and this was confirmed by the Council of Laodicea in 363 CE.

"THE ARRIVAL OF THE CODEX FACILITATED STANDARDISATION AND THE GOAL OF A SET TEXT"

Equally important was the emergence of the codex: an assemblage of all the biblical texts into a single volume. Previously, communities had relied on collections of papyrus manuscripts, each of which contained one or two of the Old Testament books. It had therefore been all too easy for churches in different places to have different selections of texts. The arrival of the codex facilitated standardisation and the goal (even if it was never fully achieved) of a set text across the Christian world. Early examples of such valuable objects include the Codex Alexandrinus; the 4th century Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in the 19th century; and the Codex Vaticanus, which Napoleon's armies managed to snatch in 1809, but which was returned to Rome following Bonaparte's fall. The precious nature of the latter text is revealed by the extraordinary care that was sometimes taken by curators in the Vatican library to limit access to its pages. One 19th century scholar reported that "they would not let me open it without searching my pockets and depriving me of pen, ink and paper". Happily, these days it can readily be accessed via the Vatican Library's website. Strikingly, however, the contents of these three ancient codices is not entirely consistent: the lists of books vary in some minor details.

CANON VERSUS CANON

The shaping of the canon remained a topic of dispute and confusion. The issue of how the Old Testament books should be ordered created numerous scholarly headaches, though it was often agreed that, in contrast to the Hebrew scriptures, the prophetic books should come last: this helped to make the case that Jesus' arrival represented the fulfilment of Old Testament predictions. Rather more troublesome was the existence of a large number of texts that, while not included in the central canon, clearly held meaning for many Christians. One early Church father insisted that the major canonical works were all that truly counted: "the fountains of salvation that he who trusteth may be filled with their oracles. In these alone is the doctrine of piety preached; let no one add to them or take anything from them."

Many others were unwilling to entirely abandon what came to be known as the deuterocanonical books, which were perceived as having lesser status but still possessing an ability to edify the faithful. These seven books were included in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint: they are Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom Of Solomon, Sirach, 1 and 2 Maccabees and Baruch - plus some additional passages in the solidly canonical books of Esther and Daniel. They were not to be used as the basis for creating dogma, but they were a worthwhile resource. Then into this mix, the status of an even broader category of apocrypha was up for debate.

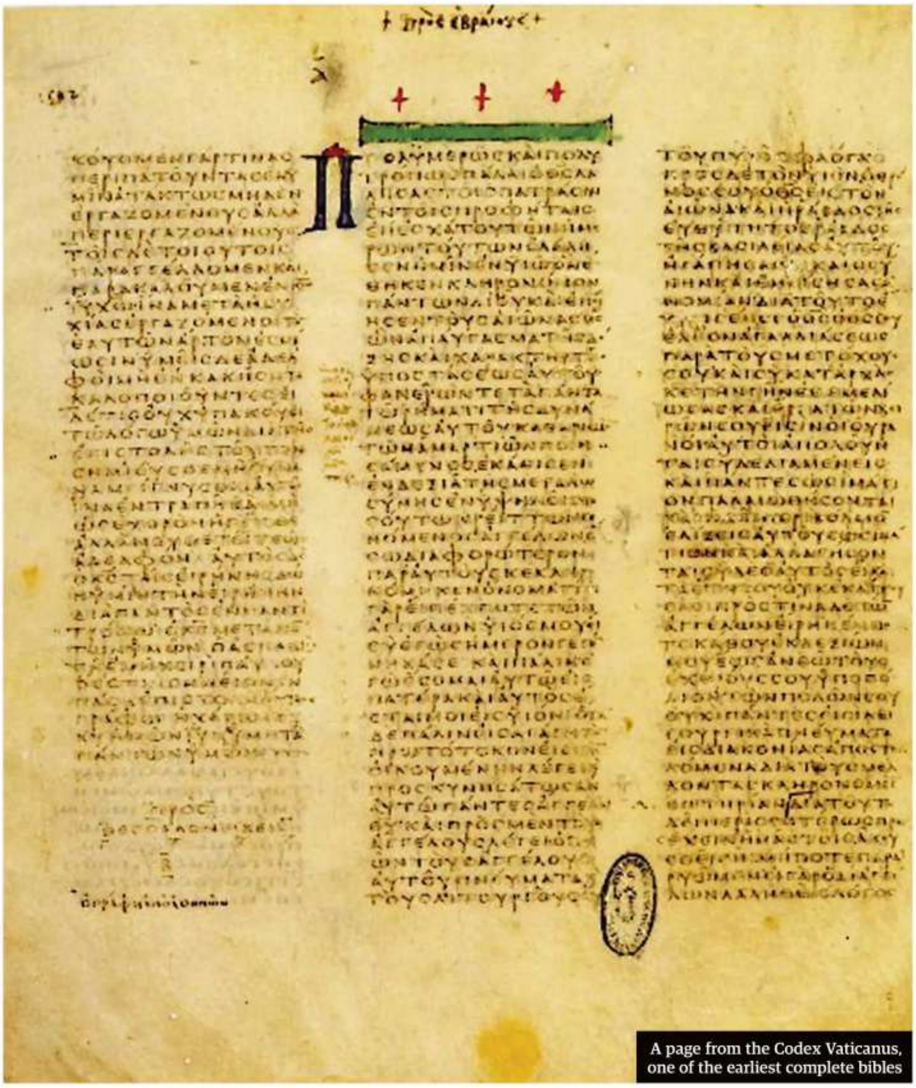
Ancient opinion about such texts varied. Jerome included some deuterocanonical texts in his Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate), though he did so rather reluctantly. Augustine appears to have had little problem with most of these texts. Broadly speaking, it became the norm to include these secondary books as an appendix to Bibles, or to insert them between the Old and New Testaments. For some theologians, however, there was great risk in moving beyond the primary canon. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, was blunt in his famous Festal Letter of 367: "Since some may be beguiled from their simplicity by the wiles of certain men, and may read other writings which are called apocryphal, and which ought not to be mingled with the scripture which is inspired by God, it seems good to me to set down these books which are known by us to be divine". Other major Church fathers, such as Origen and Epiphanius, readily included apocryphal works in their lists of approved books. The confusion is captured by the ups and downs of a text like Baruch: it was deemed acceptable by the Council of Laodicea in 363, but cast out by a council at Rome less than 20 years later. Jerome excluded Baruch, and yet Athanasius (no fan of apocrypha, as we have seen) regarded it as at least quasi-canonical. The status of the apocrypha would continue to perplex Christianity for many centuries to come.

REFORMATION SQUABBLES

Debates about canonicity simmered down after the 4th century and a broad measure of consistency, if never quite unanimity, can be detected. Textual differences between early manuscripts and codices was an issue that never went away and, notably, some Christian faith traditions - Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian and Ethiopian (which recognises 81 books), for example - embraced a larger canon. Nonetheless, as of 1500 most Western Christians had reached broad agreement on canonical matters and were happy to grant the main apocrypha a secondary role in their devotions. The famous Complutensian Polyglot Bible, produced in early 16th century Spain, includes these books and, while stressing that they lay "outside the canon which the Church has received," grants them a role in edifying the faithful.

The Reformation would muddy the waters. Martin Luther did not exhibit any great enmity towards the deuterocanonical books: he appended them to his German translation of the Bible. Others within the Protestant fraternity took a harder line, wondering if the apocrypha should be granted any special status whatsoever. This became a major fault line in the confessional struggles of the 16th and 17th centuries. Catholicism responded boldly and, at the Council of Trent in 1546, took the dramatic step of declaring that the deuterocanonical books were to be fully embraced. The Council was a rather chaotic affair. It took an inordinate amount of time to organise, attendance was often poor, and it was broken up into three distinct periods (1545-49, 1551-52, and 1562-63). Popes were worried about the power a council might wield, and political rivalry between Catholic Europe's major rulers blighted proceedings.

For all that, the Council achieved a great deal. It was, in part, an attempt to respond to the



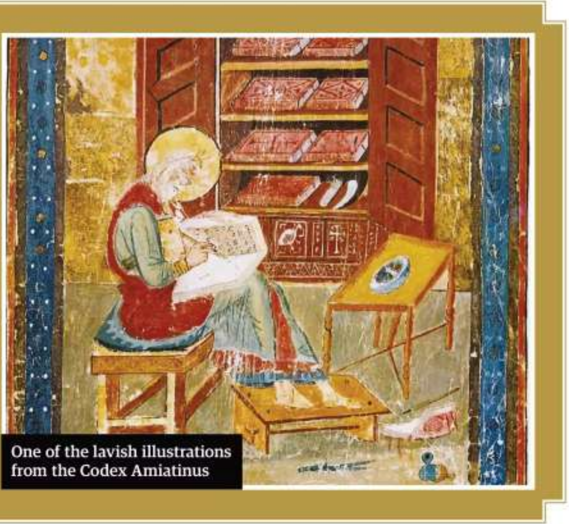
A page from the Codex Vaticanus, one of the earliest complete bibles

AN ANCIENT TREASURE

Eighth-century Northumbria produced one of the most exquisite efforts to codify the canon

Those who still talk about Europe's 'Dark Ages' would do well to study the extraordinary artistic and cultural achievements of the monasteries of north England. The joint monastery complex of Jarrow and Wearmouth was able to attract Europe's finest glass makers to assemble one of the era's most impressive libraries, and to inspire Bede in his prolific scholarly endeavours.

One of the institution's crowning glories was the Codex Amiatinus: the oldest entirely complete biblical codex to have survived. The work was completed in 716 and one copy, of three, was sent to Rome as a gift for the pope. Unfortunately, mishaps en route meant it did not arrive and languished for many years in an Italian monastery. The codex is an imposing volume: weighing in at 34 kilograms, with pages measuring 70 by 52 centimetres. It contains sumptuous illustrations and is a triumph of the early medieval scribe's craft. Endless swan and goose feather writing implements must have been required, and to provide sufficient vellum for the pages, the monastery was required to invest heavily in additional cattle. More than 500 hides were pressed into service. Sadly, the other two copies have not survived, though a few leaves have occasionally surfaced: a scrap was found in a second-hand Newcastle bookshop in 1901.



One of the lavish illustrations from the Codex Amiatinus

Protestant challenge: a traditional understanding of the mechanisms of salvation was asserted, all seven sacraments were defended, and veneration of the saints and the Virgin Mary was trumpeted. Reform was also on the agenda: from improvements in clerical education to an assault on abuses that had crept into the Church's practices. The biblical canon was a particularly urgent matter of business and, in response to the challenges of the early Protestant leaders, the authority of the Vulgate was stressed while the apocrypha - at least the seven texts that would be known as deuterocanonical - were granted a status on a par with the established canon. A church council at Florence during the 15th century had said much the same thing but, in the fragmented religious world of the Reformation, it was deemed necessary to shout this message from the ecclesiastical rooftops.

This infuriated, among others, John Calvin, the great reformer of Geneva. Like Luther, he did not want to eradicate the apocrypha, and bibles supported by Calvin would include them in a subsidiary role: Calvin also quoted from the apocrypha upon occasion. It was more a matter of their precise status. The Council of Trent, he grumbled, had marked "all the books with the same chalk" and insisted "on placing the apocrypha in the same rank as the others". This, he wrote, was to behave "promiscuously". Calvin conceded that some of the early Church fathers (including the mighty Augustine) had approved of treating the apocrypha in an almost canonical fashion, but times, Calvin asserted, had changed and the debates had been concluded. Confusion among the early Christians was forgivable: confusion 15 centuries into the Christian project was absurd. Calvin also stressed that "I am not one of those... who would entirely disapprove of the reading of these books," but he objected to "giving them an authority which they never possessed". All told, "those books which the fathers of Trent raise so high must sink to a lower place". For Catholicism the central seven apocryphal texts were, as the term put it, deuterocanonical - a second or secondary canon. For many Protestants they were still simply apocrypha, and to be treated with a curious mixture of reverence and suspicion.

Protestant denominations would continue to differ in their adjudications. For the most part, the old tradition of including them in a separate section continued: they would, initially at least, make an appearance in the King James Version of the Bible. The KJV also, rather surprisingly, found space for even more obscure apocryphal texts - 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer Of Manasseh. More radical Protestants were having none of this and at the aforementioned Westminster Assembly the apocrypha were denounced as "not being of divine inspiration," "no part of the canon of scripture," but merely "human writings" with "no authority in the Church of God". Squabbles over the apocrypha would always remain one of the sorest points of discord between Catholics and Protestants.

It is also worth noting how the Reformation's theological disputes could influence ideas about the Christian canon. Luther's protests were triggered by his hatred of the practice of doling out indulgences: he saw them as a way of buying a shorter period in purgatory, as well as a way for the established Church to enrich itself. In 1519, matters came to a head during a debate with the formidable theologian Johann Eck. At this stage, Luther had not entirely rejected the notion of purgatory, but he looked askance at the practice of praying for the dead. Eck was quick to point out that scriptural passages, chiefly some verses in 2 Maccabees, supported such devotions. Painted into a corner, Luther announced that this was irrelevant since 2 Maccabees should not be regarded as canonical: a rather radical step. Writing a few years later he was even more explicit: "That there is a purgatory cannot be proved by those scriptures which are authentic and trustworthy".

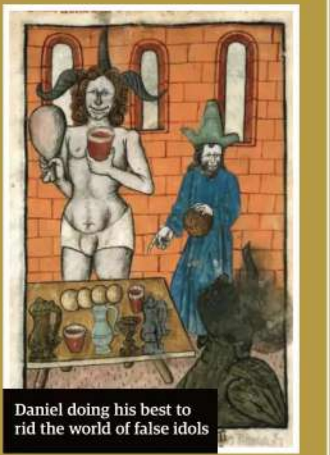
AN ENDLESS QUEST

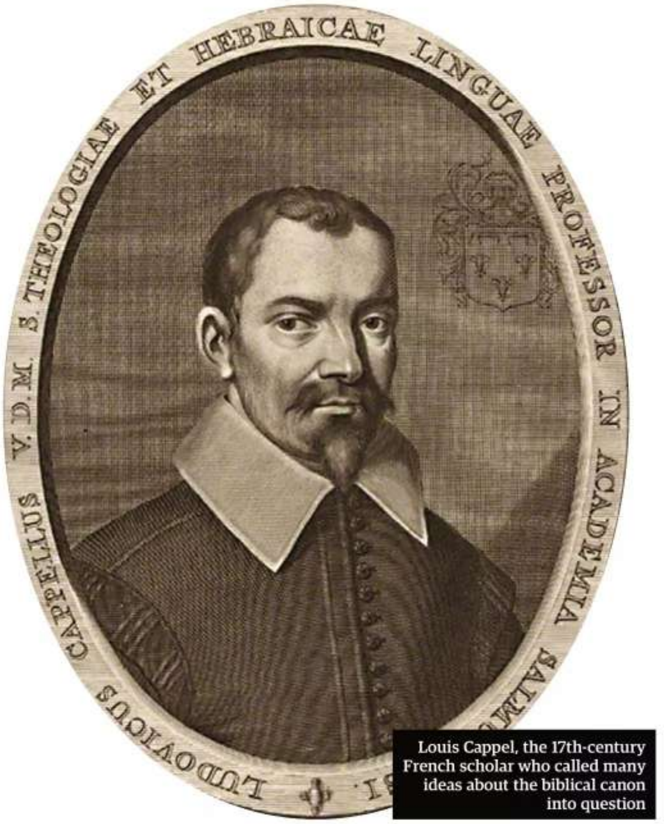
The fixity of Christian scripture is, in many ways, a rather mythical entity. Even the Codex Vaticanus mentioned earlier differs in various ways from other contemporary codices, and clashes with Jerome's Vulgate at various points. The canonical sands have always shifted although, on the whole, the continuity of the central biblical books has been quite impressive. It took a true radical to overturn exegetical apple carts and, in this regard, the laurels probably belong to the 2nd century heretic,

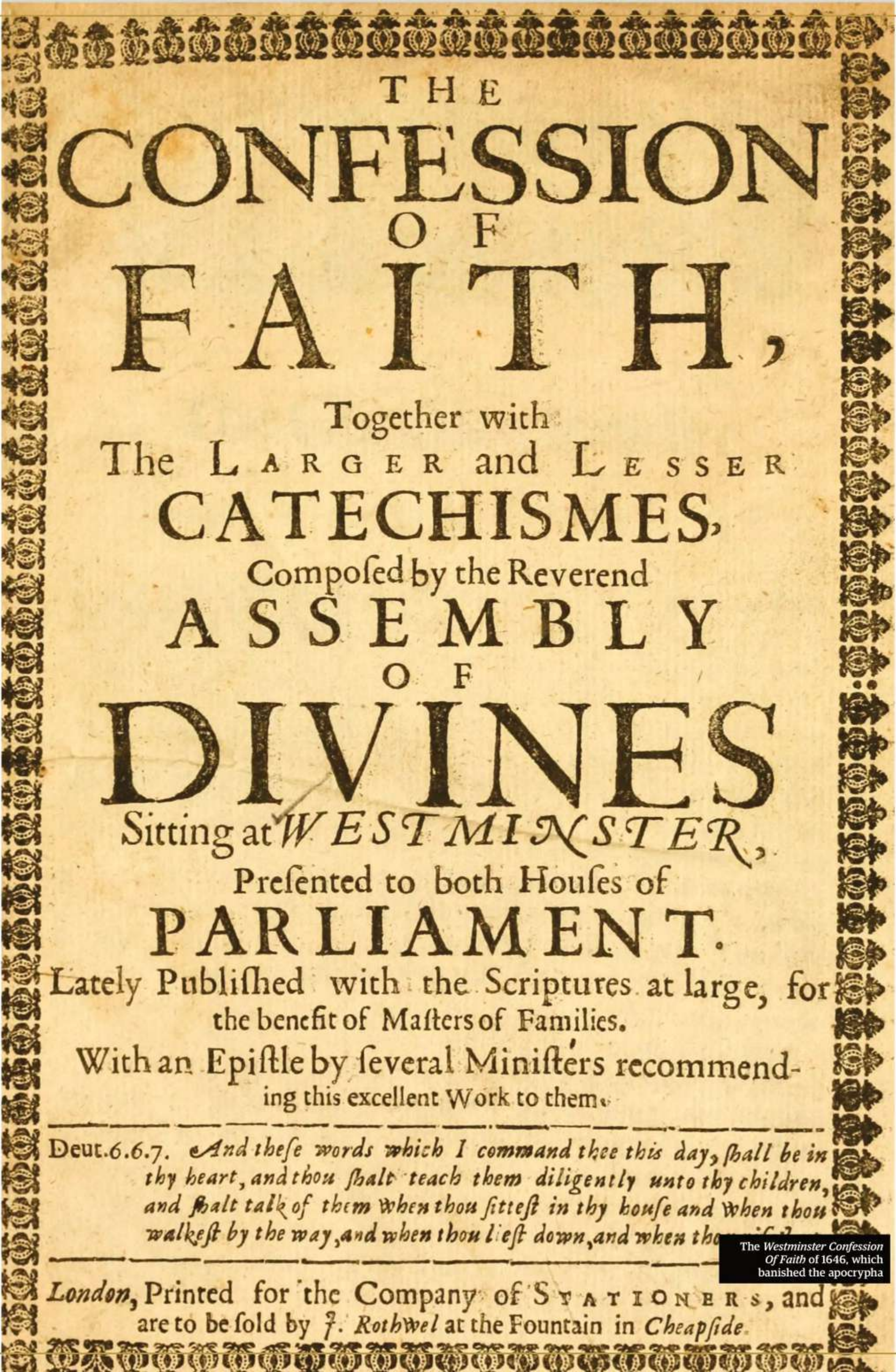
BEL AND THE DRAGON

Even those who dismiss the apocrypha have perhaps regretted the exclusion of one particularly compelling tale

One of the most contested parts of the apocrypha is an addition to the Book of Daniel. It was rejected by rabbinic Judaism, accepted by most Catholics and Orthodox Christians, and jettisoned by most Protestant denominations. It is hard to imagine, however, that anyone ever questioned that it was a good story. Daniel is doing very nicely at the court of Cyrus of Persia, but is dismayed by the worship lavished on a statue of Bel - who, for Daniel, is a false god. King Cyrus is not best pleased by this allegation and points out that the god seems to eat all the offerings, including 40 sheep, left for him every day. Daniel is determined to prove his point. The doors of the god's quarters are locked one night and yet, the next day, the food has been consumed. Daniel had been cunning, however. He had left ashes on the floor and a trail of footprints proved that the priests and their families had been sneaking in for midnight snacks through a secret passage way. The priests are killed and the idol is destroyed. The contested section of the text also finds time for Daniel to slay a dragon worshipped by the Babylonians.


Daniel doing his best to rid the world of false idols


LUDOVICUS CAPPELLUS V. D. M. S. THEOLOGIAE ET HEBRAICAE LINGUAE PROFESSOR IN ACADEMIA SALMU
Louis Cappel, the 17th-century French scholar who called many ideas about the biblical canon into question



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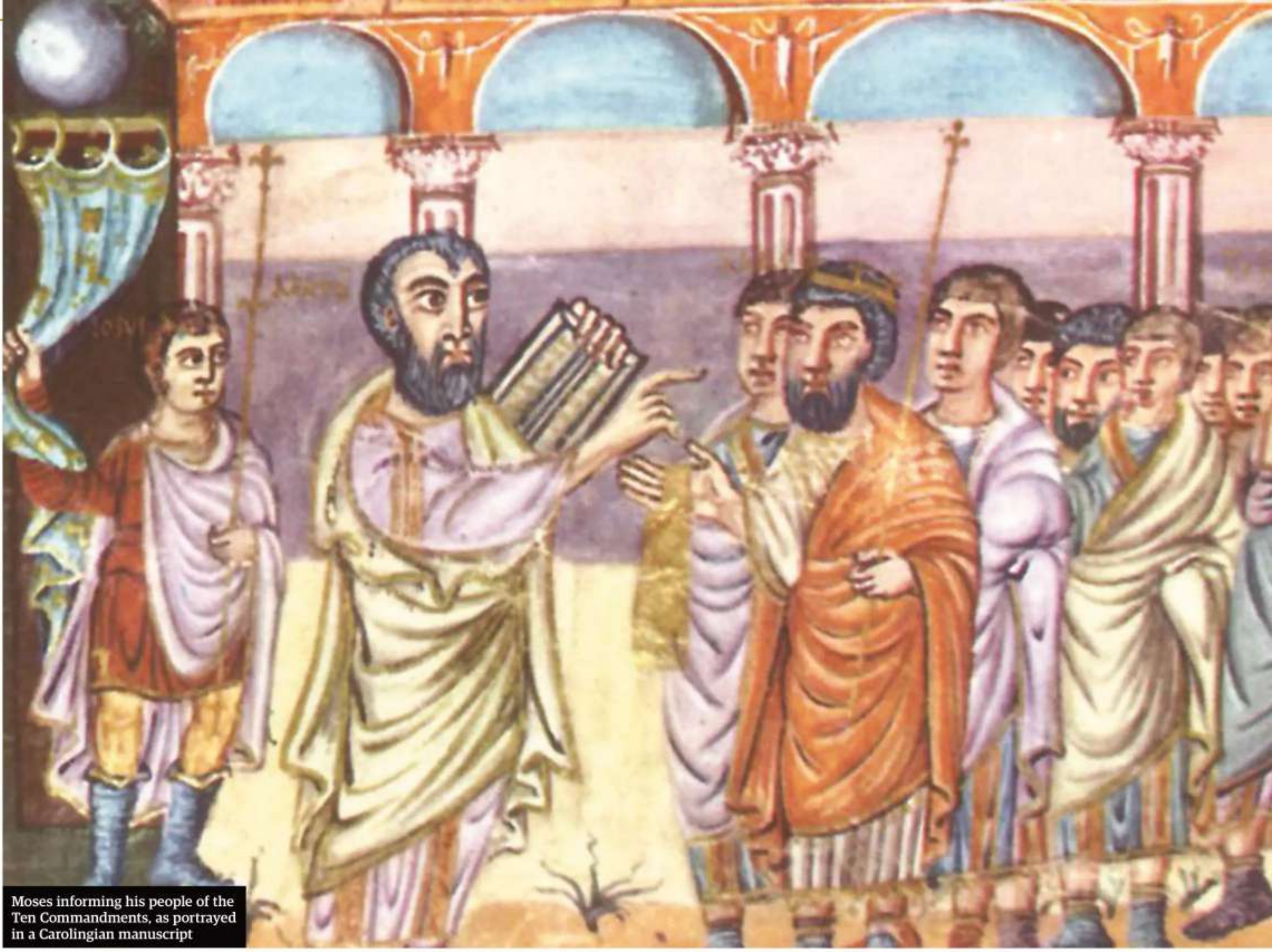
Deut.6.6.7. *And theſe words which I command thee this day, ſhall be in thy heart, and thou ſhalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and ſhalt talk of them when thou ſitteſt in thy houſe and when thou walkeſt by the way, and when thou lieſt down, and when tho*

London, Printed for the Company of STATIONERS, and are to be ſold by *J. Rothwel* at the Fountain in *Cheapſide*.

The *Westminster Confession Of Faith* of 1646, which banished the apocrypha


Moses informing his people of the Ten Commandments, as portrayed in a Carolingian manuscript

Marcion. While other early Christians debated which parts of Hebrew scripture ought to be privileged, Marcion opted to simply throw the whole thing away. The true God was only to be found in the New Testament, while the Old Testament was little more than a paean to the evil, material deity who inhabited Marcion's curious vision of a dualistic universe. The Mosaic ideas and rubrics of the Hebrew scriptures, he announced, were utterly at odds with Jesus' teaching.

Happily, most Christians have accepted that their faith is the proud inheritor of Jewish scripture although, as the eminent Jesuit cardinal Robert Bellarmine put it in the 17th century, nothing could be taken for granted. Some might talk about scripture being the only true source of Christian truth and snarl at feeble human attempts to impose traditions, but surely the very act of compiling and codifying scripture had been a fluid process and a tradition in and of itself. Attempts to understand the very concept of a canon would become increasingly conflicted during the 18th and 19th centuries. What criteria were to be applied: antiquity, authorship, consistency with other scriptural texts? The rise of historical biblical criticism helped both to clarify and confuse such issues in almost equal measure.

This development had a long pedigree. As early as the 17th century, scholars such as Louis Cappel were tracing how the Old Testament texts had changed over time, and how errors and corruptions may have crept in. The French Oratorian priest Richard Simon published a decidedly provocative tome during the reign of Louis XIV - the *Histoire Critique Du Vieux Testament* - which argued that Moses was hardly likely to have been the author of all the biblical texts ascribed to him. The entire print run of Simon's volume (1,300 copies) was seized and destroyed. And during the next century, the German scholar Johann Salomo Semler began to write with considerable vim about the untrustworthiness of any notion of canonicity. It was, he suggested, a human invention, not some divine mandate.

"THE FIXITY OF CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE IS, IN MANY WAYS, A RATHER MYTHICAL ENTITY"

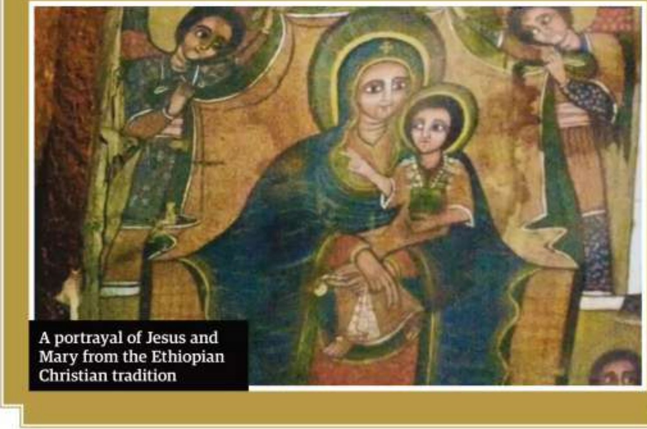
The old arguments also continued to rumble on. The issue of the apocrypha had largely been settled within Catholicism, but a to-and-fro continued to define Protestantism's approach. In 1827, the influential British and Foreign Bible Society decided it would only publish bibles without the apocrypha, but they were granted a reprieve in the Revised Standard Version of 1952, and then banished from the New International Version of 1978. Making choices about the canon can still be a reliable indicator of where one resides on the Protestant theological spectrum.

Generally speaking, the canon wars are considerably more polite and peaceful these days, but they are only the latest chapter in a long, and endlessly confusing story. It is sobering to recall that biblical scholars have been arguing about whether to include six additional chapters in the Book of Esther for 2,000 years. How to determine when God is truly speaking? How to square the obvious contradictions in the text? As one ancient Jewish story goes, a rabbi noticed that parts of Ezekiel appeared to challenge the teachings of the Torah. Anticipating many long nights ahead of him, and with a need for light to work by, "Three hundred barrels of oil were taken up to him and he sat in an upper chamber", attempting to reconcile the texts. For all the conflicts, everyone would presumably agree that trying to construct bibles has never been an easy task.

THE VIEW FROM ETHIOPIA

How the Orthodox Tewahedo Church pushes its canonical limits

A significant presence in Africa from the 4th century, the Orthodox Tewahedo Church was tied to the Coptic Church until 1959, when it gained its independence. Its heartlands are Ethiopia and Eritrea, with communities among the Ethiopian diaspora around the world. Just short of 40 million Ethiopians belong to the Church: roughly half the nation's population. The Tewahedo canon includes the Old Testament books shared by other major Christian denominations, and the Church adopted the apocrypha as canonical at an early stage. It also reveres books usually pushed to the sidelines and ones that no other church holds as canonical. Its Old Testament canon runs to 46 texts which, in addition to 35 New Testament books, makes an impressive canonical total of 81. There are also significant departures from other traditions within the narrower canon. The Tewahedo version of Maccabees - 1, 2 and 3 Meqabyan - differs greatly from the texts familiar to Western Christians.



A portrayal of Jesus and Mary from the Ethiopian Christian tradition

© Getty, Wiki: Alessio Damato

ONE JESUS, FOUR GOSPELS

Who was Jesus? What was he? Or, as church-goers might ask, who is he? The Bible's Gospels tell us four distinct and gripping stories

Words by Robin Griffith-Jones

MARK THE REBEL

Mark's account of Jesus is short, impetuous, fast-moving. His Greek is clumsy, his story simple; but he has arranged it with masterly care. At its start, Jesus' disciples bask in their master's triumphs: he heals, he teaches, he walks on water, he feeds thousands with a handful of bread.

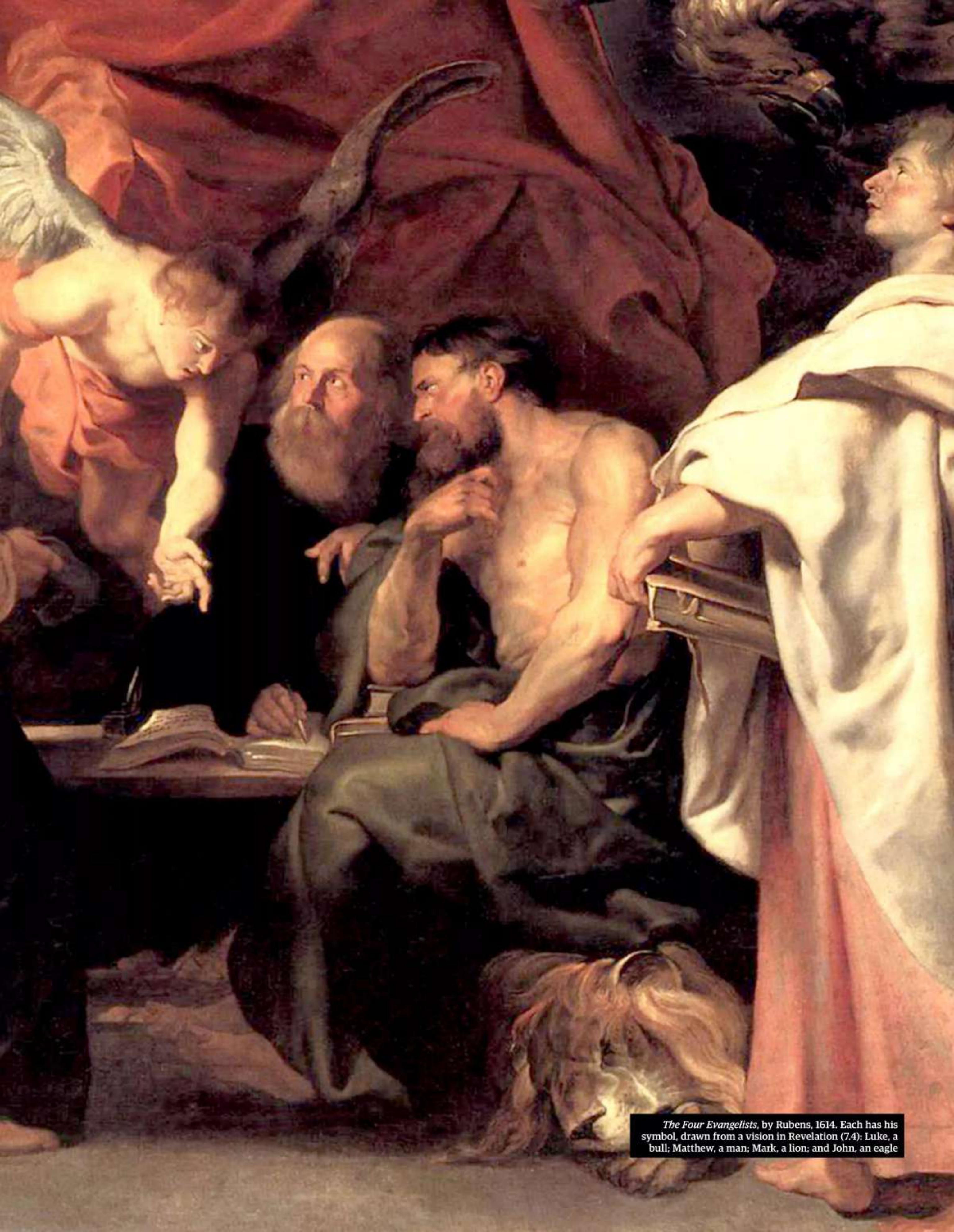
At the mid-point of the narrative, Mark changes key. Jesus asks openly the question that informs the whole Gospel: "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29). Peter declares Jesus to be God's Anointed agent, the Messiah or Christ, and in the next sentence, for the first time, Jesus speaks of his impending rejection and death. Opposition, determined and dangerous, grows closer - Jesus' disciples dream blindly on of both privilege and power, but when put to the test, they run away.

The Gospel darkens. Mark's Jesus seemingly dies in despair: "My God, my God," he cries, "why have you abandoned me?" (Mark 15:34). Jesus' following is scattered, his battle lost. We expect any such defeat to be turned into victory on Easter Day. But in Mark's Gospel, as Mark seems to have planned it, we never quite get this turn. Three women come to Jesus' empty tomb, see an angel, hear that Jesus is risen and run away in terror - and that's it. Here, the Gospel ends.

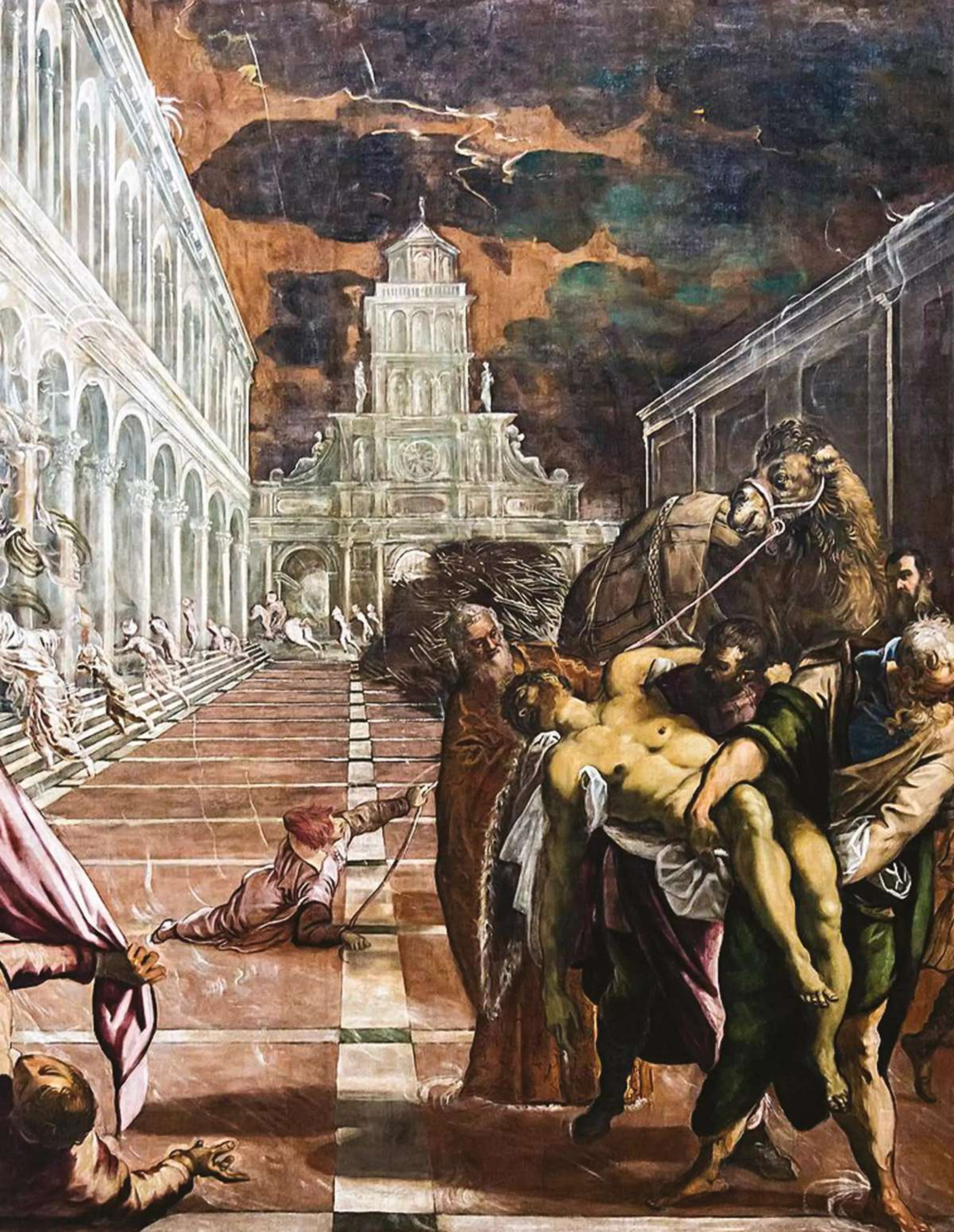
We cannot be sure of the context in and for which this story was written, but we have a clue. Mark was said to have been the helper and scribe of Simon Peter, leader of Jesus' disciples. Peter was killed in Rome in the persecution that followed the fire of 64 CE. Half the city - the capital of the empire - was destroyed in the flames. Ugly rumours spread that the Emperor Nero himself was to blame for the fire. Nero must deflect the blame. The Christians in Rome had been living undisturbed, but they were not popular; they took no part in the pagan rites around them and they murmured about their Jesus as a rival 'emperor'. The edict was issued: the Christians had lit the fires, so arrest them. Nero laid on a festival. In an arena he had the Christians dressed in animal pelts and torn to pieces by lions. Around the arena he had the Christians hung up on crosses, and covered in pitch. As daylight faded, the crosses were set alight. Where was the triumph of this Jesus now?

Jesus had spoken over and again of 'the Son of the Human'. For Greek-speakers, this figure was familiar only from a vision of Heaven seen centuries before and recorded in the Bible's book of the prophet Daniel (Daniel 7). This Son of the Human represented, in God's court, God's own obedient people and their ultimate triumph over

> "MARK WAS SAID TO HAVE BEEN THE HELPER AND SCRIBE OF SIMON PETER, LEADER OF JESUS' DISCIPLES"



The Four Evangelists, by Rubens, 1614. Each has his symbol, drawn from a vision in Revelation (7.4): Luke, a bull; Matthew, a man; Mark, a lion; and John, an eagle



oppression. Mark's great claim will have dawned gradually on the terrified Christians in Rome. Their Jesus had been this heavenly Son of the Human; he had - unimaginably - come down to Earth and suffered as they were now suffering, and had been invested with all the power that would in the end be theirs. There was a brighter light shining in their darkness than they could yet see.

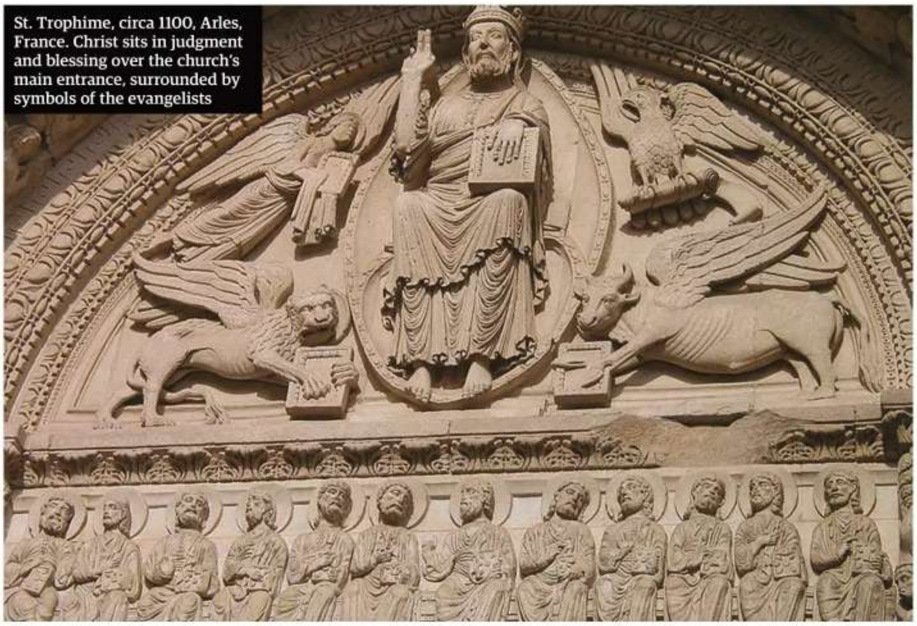
MATTHEW THE RABBI

From the violent, restless story of an émigré, to the architectural dignity of Matthew's Gospel, composed in an ancient and distinguished Jewish community. Matthew's Gospel draws on Mark's. It was probably written in Antioch in Syria, due north from Jerusalem along the Levantine coast.

Matthew offers us a stately, commanding Jesus. We hear of Jesus' miraculous conception and of his birth, of Jesus as the promised Emmanuel - 'God with us' - and of the Wise Men's visit and gifts. This Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, the essence of all his teaching compiled into one long speech (Matthew 5-7): "Blessed are the poor in spirt…"; "In your prayers, say, 'Our Father in heaven…'" He tells of the sheep who are saved the Last Judgment and the goats who are condemned (Matthew 25:31-46). This Jesus dies in apparent despair, as in Mark's story, but from Matthew we hear of the risen Jesus, invested with all power, who commands his disciples to baptise all nations, "and I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Matthew searches the Jewish scriptures for clues to the identity and standing of Jesus. Was Jesus a leader like Moses, bringing his people out of slavery into some Promised Land? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches obedience to Moses' Law - and in the next breath, it seems, on his own authority rewrites it. Was Jesus somehow a new Israel, overcoming the temptations in the desert to which the old Israel had succumbed? But where does this leave the Israel of old, declared by God to be his own people, his child?

Matthew invokes such questions, but he needs more. His Jesus is not just supremely wise; he is the Wisdom of God in human form. His name Emmanuel as the Gospel's state proclaims that in him, "God is with us". His closing words after the resurrection: "I am with you" in all power, overcome any distinction between himself and God.



St. Trophime, circa 1100, Arles, France. Christ sits in judgment and blessing over the church's main entrance, surrounded by symbols of the evangelists

In 66 CE the Jews of Israel had rebelled against Roman rule. For four years they fought on. When, at last, the Romans captured Jerusalem, the Temple itself was set alight and the holy city was left in ruins. In the following years, all the empire's Jews must surely unite in mutual support. But at this very time, the question of Jesus was demanding attention in the synagogues. His followers proclaimed themselves to be the 'real' Israel of God's choosing. Many were Jewish, but Gentiles were attracted to this sect too. Some of the sect's leaders were loyal to the Jewish Law, others not. Either way, all were claiming to have been given authority over their community direct from Jesus himself.

There was increasing bitterness. Worshippers were divided. Did they belong in the synagogues, in the church, or both? Matthew sets out to persuade, cajole and, if necessary, to threaten his readers out of the synagogues and into loyalty to this newly established church alone. The result has ever since been double-edged: what Matthew wrote to win a local dispute with the synagogues, later churches have used to fuel a terrible anti-Semitism.

LUKE THE CHRONICLER

What, then, of Luke? Here we read a story of grand adventure: a vast cast of characters, men and women both rich and poor, a wonderfully elaborate story of Jesus' conception and birth, and a far less harrowing account of his death. Luke writes two volumes, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, for the Gentile powers that be and for imperial officials worried by what they hear of this new sect spreading across the Mediterranean westwards from their empire's eastern fringe. He purports to dedicate his books to "Your Excellency

JESUS AND THE GNOSTIC GOSPELS

The words that didn't make the final cut

In 1945 a cache of 'gospels' was discovered in an earthenware jar near Nag Hammadi, Egypt; they are written in Coptic. They had been hidden some 1,600 years before. Among the surviving documents, the Gospels of Thomas, Philip and Mary have attracted widespread attention. They give Mary Magdalene a major role; they come from 'gnostic' Christians, suppressed by the major churches; they are uncontaminated by those churches' later doctrines. These gospels seemed to bring to view a more real Jesus, a fresher, less distorted Christianity, and heroic victims of the churches' oppression.

Sadly, not so. Most of these texts tell of the risen Jesus who had escaped all the squalour of the flesh and would help his 'gnostic' followers to do the same. The texts are as artfully composed as the biblical gospels. What mattered was the knowledge that this Jesus could impart to the few spiritual souls who were able to be saved. These souls, seen as female, longed for spiritual union with their male saviour Christ. The rest of humanity, was beyond redemption.

This ancient Gnosticism is chilling. What we should rescue is the battle we can trace there between women who claimed authority and male leaders who opposed them. Stories of authoritative, insightful 'female' souls inspired - and were perhaps inspired by actual women who sought similar authority in their own churches.

The end of The Gospel of Thomas and start of The Apocryphon of John. A double page from the Nag Hammadi books ('codices'), written in Coptic

© CANOVAS Alvaro / Getty; Rolf Süssbrich / Wiki

Theophilus", a Roman imperial official (Luke 1:3-4, Acts 1:1). Luke adopts a gracious, literary style; he casts his story in a mould that his cultured readers would recognise, respect and enjoy. Luke's story is the most immediately attractive of the four. His Jesus is sympathetic and generous. Here are the great stories told by Jesus of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 10:29-37, 15:11-32, 16:19-31). This Jesus dies with confidence in God and with forgiveness for his enemies (Luke 23:33-46), and on the evening of Easter Day two of his followers, in a long poetic scene, meet the risen Jesus in the dusk and quite fail at first to recognise him (Luke 24:13-35).

Luke sees in Jesus an infinitely attractive example. And over and again the words and actions that Luke records of Jesus are matched by Luke's own comments, by his take on the story. The convergence of such a historian and his hero makes of Luke's account our most appealing Gospel.

Of all our Gospels, Luke's reads most like a chronicle, a straightforward narrative about a historical world such as we inhabit. Yet Luke has an agenda. Thoughtful people had sharp questions to ask. New religions were deeply suspect; the church had abandoned its roots in that ancient Judaism of which the whole empire knew; Jesus' followers were known for their fierce language of freedom and a world turned upside-down. Beneath Luke's gracious writing there is an urgent need to reassure such readers as Theophilus that this Jesus and his followers were no threat to Rome.

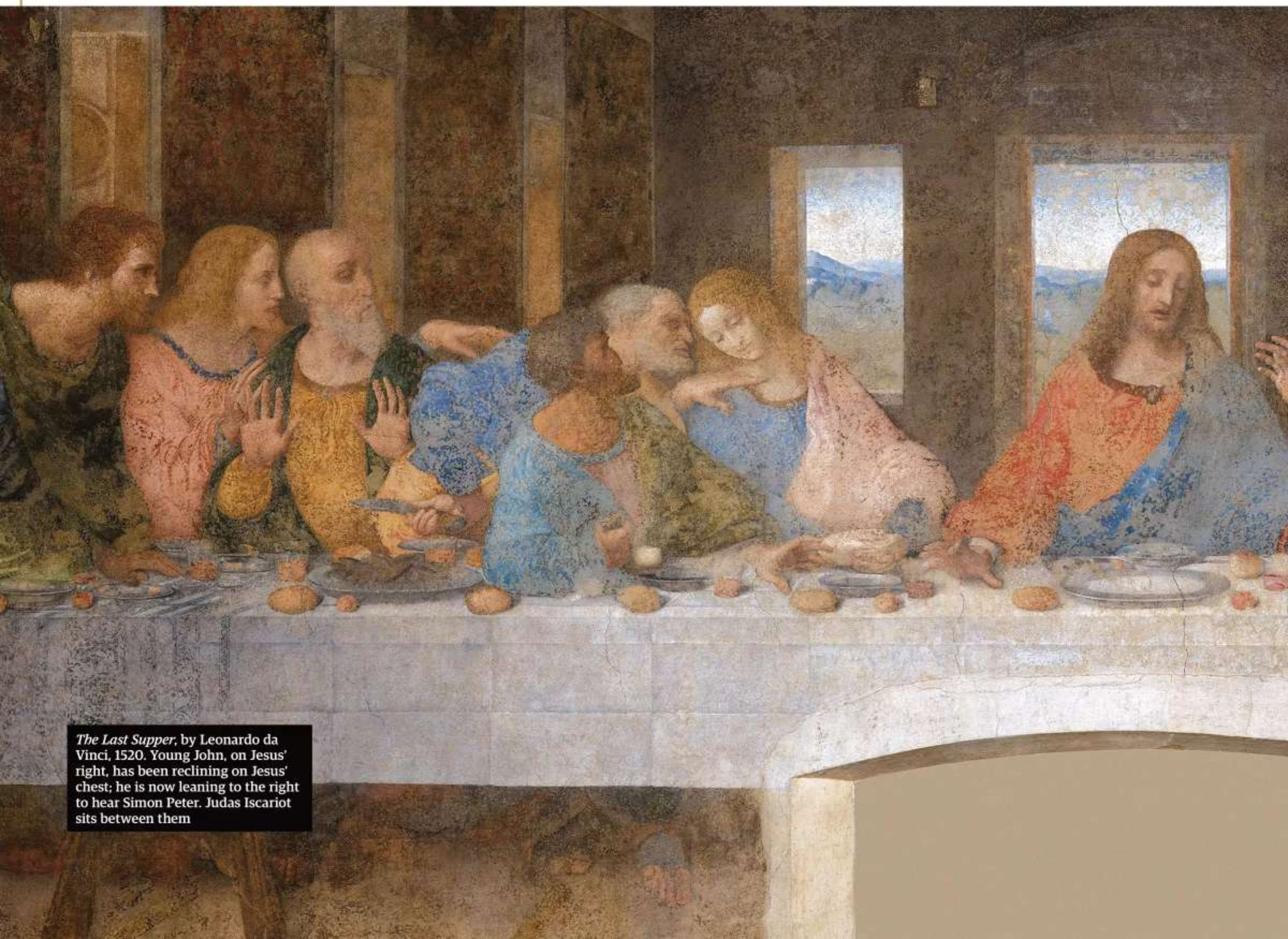
Our Luke sounds so complaisant, so urbane. Has he lost the hard edge of Mark and Matthew's vision? Far from it. Luke flags up the most inflammatory language of the early church – and transforms it. His Jesus is no threat to Rome, but brings a revolution nonetheless. Luke's reader is not invited to just observe this story, to sit back and enjoy its adventure. Journeys are under way: Jesus' journey then from Galilee to Jerusalem, and now the reader's own. Here for the reader is a journey into understanding, commitment – and the strange 'revolution' that Luke's Jesus brings.

"LUKE'S STORY IS THE MOST IMMEDIATELY ATTRACTIVE OF THE FOUR"

JOHN THE MYSTIC

With John we enter a different world. Gone are the short, sharp stories and brisk one-liners of our other Gospels' Jesus. Now we have a few elaborate scenes followed by long, spiralling discussions. John's Jesus concludes his public teaching with a climactic miracle: he raises his friend Lazarus from death. The crowd is enthusiastic, while the authorities are frightened – and their manoeuvres are under way that will lead to Jesus' death.

To do justice to his Jesus, John takes the reader right back to the dawn of creation. When God created, he said "Let there be light". That Word



The Last Supper, by Leonardo da Vinci, 1520. Young John, on Jesus' right, has been reclining on Jesus' chest; he is now leaning to the right to hear Simon Peter. Judas Iscariot sits between them of God was his self-expression, plan, will and presence - and Jesus is that Word, in human form. There is a mystery here too deep for normal human understanding. John is convinced that to have any hope of comprehension the reader must be transformed, brought to 'new birth' into a spiritual life. In the boldest strategy of all, John sets out to induce that re-birth in the very course of the reader's reading. John is the midwife of the spirit. No wonder his book was already, by the 3rd century, called 'the spiritual Gospel'.

A cripple is healed; a blind man regains his sight; Lazarus is raised from the dead - each of these stories tells of a single figure. Each tells, too, of the reader, for it is the readers who are drawn through healing and sight to new life, and who hear the climactic command of Jesus echoing in their tomb, "Lazarus, come on out."

"Let there be light," said the God of Genesis on day one of creation - and creation was under way, of day and night, land and sea, vegetation, animals and humankind. Adam was entrusted with the Garden of Eden, to tend it, to name its creatures and so to finish their creation. On day six of creation, God completed all his works. And thereafter God, at one with humankind, would walk in the garden in the cool of the day. However, a serpent spoiled the garden; and into the garden where Jesus was came the traitor, a tool of Satan.

Everything, in John's vision, comes full circle. As Jesus dies on Friday, the week's day six, he declares: "It is completed". The new creation is finished. On Easter morning, day one of the new week, very early, when it is still dark, Mary Magdalene weeps outside the empty tomb. She turns and sees Jesus, but she thinks that he is the gardener. He calls her by her name. 'Eve' is once more in Eden; with an 'Adam' who far transcends any human being. He is the God who had once walked in Eden at the cool of the day. He is once more at one with humankind. No serpent lurks. All creation is made new, and its occupants are John's own readers.

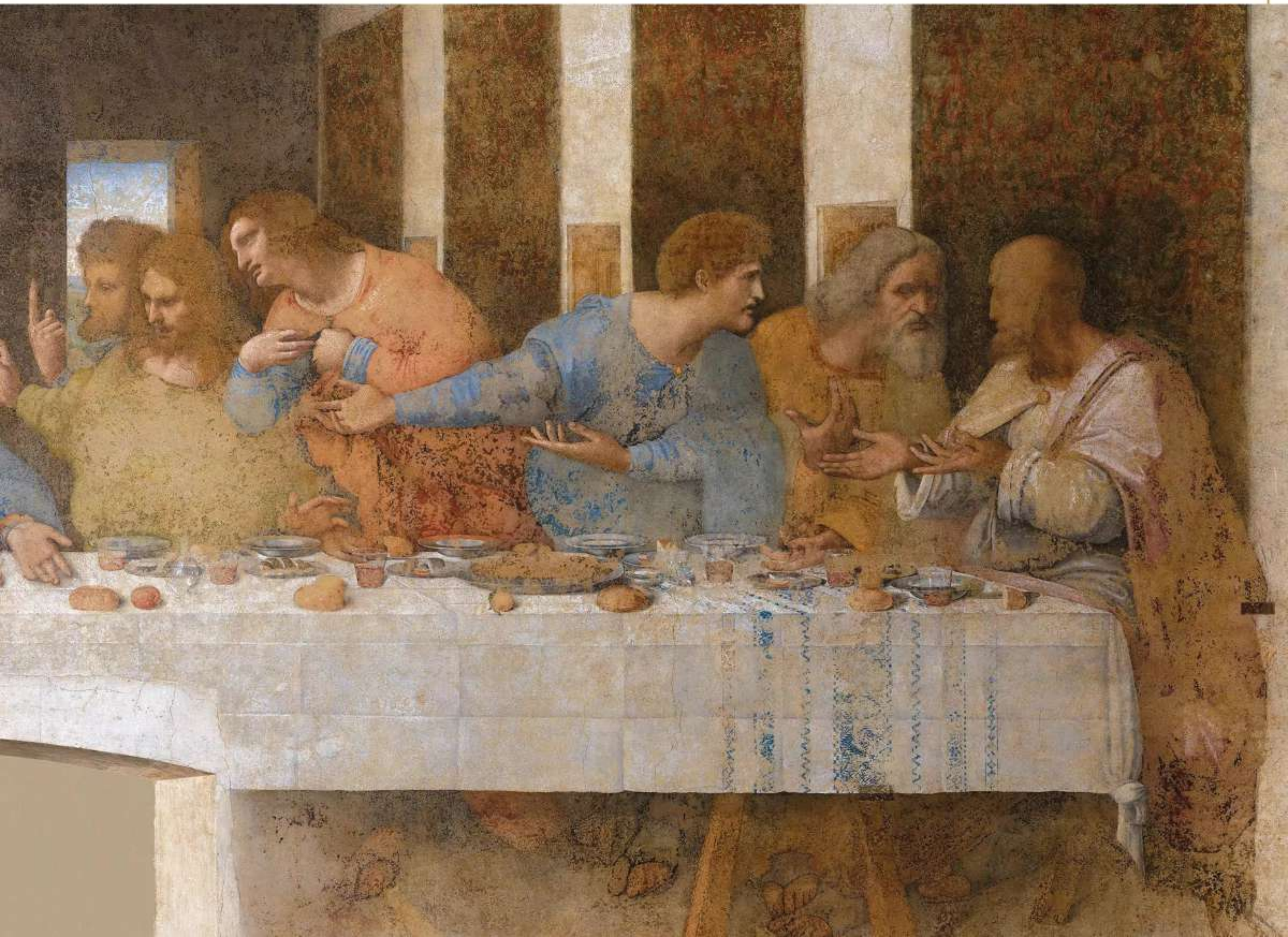
WHO WERE THE MEN?

Within a century of Jesus' death, Christians were writing about our Gospels and their writers. Behind those names stand decades of editing and refinement, that took the Gospels to their present form.

MARK

We hear in The Acts of the Apostles of John Mark, linked with his Cypriot cousin Barnabas (4:36, Col. 4.10), with Simon Peter (Acts 1:12), and with Paul (12:25). At one point, John Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas to go back to Jerusalem (13:13), and when Barnabas later suggested that he should re-join them on their mission, Paul refused. There was an argument. John Mark and Barnabas went off to Cyprus (15:39). Paul was at some point reconciled with John Mark (Col. 4:10).

We then hear of "my young Mark" with Peter again in the hated "Babylon", a thin disguise for Rome (1 Peter 5:13). Before 125 CE we hear from Bishop Papias: "Mark was Peter's interpreter; he wrote down accurately but not in order all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings. Mark had not heard the Lord, nor been a follower of his, but later of Peter" (*Commentary on the Lord's Sayings*). We cannot be sure if Papias was right - there was, after all, every reason to discover or create a link between the Gospel and Jesus' greatest disciple.



LUKE

"Luke," we read at the end of one Pauline letter, "the much-loved physician, sends his greetings" (Col. 4:14). And again: "Luke alone is with me" (2 Tim. 4:10). Some passages in Acts are written in the first person plural, as if by someone who shared Paul's journeys: "On the first day of the week," for example, "We met for the breaking of bread together..." (Acts 20:7) It would be easy to imagine that these were entries in a diary incorporated by their own writer, Paul's sole companion, into a chronicle he wrote, but it is impossible to prove. We might question such an attribution to Luke that so advantageously lent Paul's authority to the books.

'Luke' is a Greek version of a Latin name. Luke may have been Jewish; a former slave - perhaps his master's highly educated secretary - might well have adopted his Gentile master's name. But whether Jewish or Gentile, Luke inhabits the Gentile world and knows it well. He is attuned to its sensibilities; and is perhaps the Gospels' best envoy to all those readers who are Gentiles themselves.

MATTHEW

We hear in Matthew's own Gospel that Jesus, "passing by, saw a man called Matthew seated at the tax-desk, and says to him, 'Follow me', and he got up and followed him". (Matt. 9:9) The Gospel then specifies Matthew as the disciple who made his living out of tax-collection (Matt. 10:3). Matthew's story of this call is indebted to Mark's account of a similar incident, when "Levi" was called (Mark 2:13). It may be that Matthew was a Levite, and was known by both names.

Did this disciple write or edit the Gospel that bears his name? Our earliest evidence is again in Papias' commentary on the Lord's Sayings: "Matthew in the Hebrew language arranged the sayings, and each person translated them as best he could". This Hebrew - or rather, Aramaic - Gospel of Matthew is intriguing. No trace of it has survived, and our own Greek Gospel of Matthew does not read like a translation. That Aramaic original may indeed be a chimaera. Papias' crucial sentence about Matthew could be translated as such: "Matthew organised the sayings in the style used in Jewish writings".

JOHN

An unnamed figure in John's Gospel is "the disciple whom Jesus loved". He reclined on Jesus' chest at the supper before Jesus died (John 13:23-4). This disciple saw Jesus' death: "He who saw this has testified to it, and his testimony is truthful, and that man knows that he speaks the truth, so that you too might believe" (John 19:35).

Who was that eye-witness? John's next and last chapter has long been seen as an appendix, written by a slightly later author. "The disciple whom Jesus loved is the disciple who is testifying about these things and who wrote them, and we [his own pupils, who preserved his work] know that his testimony is true" (John 21:20).

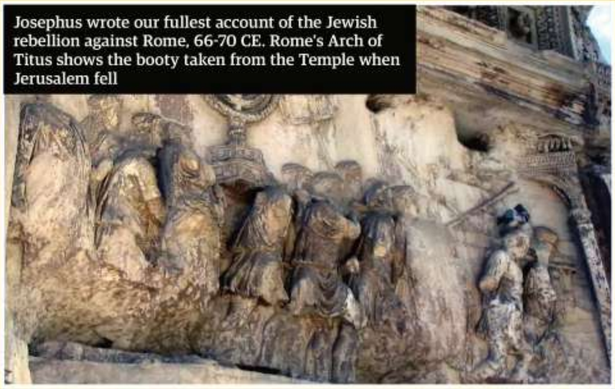
Eventually this disciple gets an identity: John, perhaps one of the fiery sons of Zebedee (Mark 3:17, 10:35; Luke 9:54). John, we are told, lived at Ephesus until the reign of Trajan, emperor from 98 CE. As a young man Polycarp, who died in 156 CE, spent time with John. Irenaeus, writing around 190, heard Polycarp speak of him. Irenaeus tells us, "Later John the Lord's disciple who reclined on the Lord's chest himself published the Gospel while staying at Ephesus in Asia". Perhaps our Gospel, through to its completion, really was under the direction of "the disciple whom Jesus loved".

JOSEPHUS AND JESUS

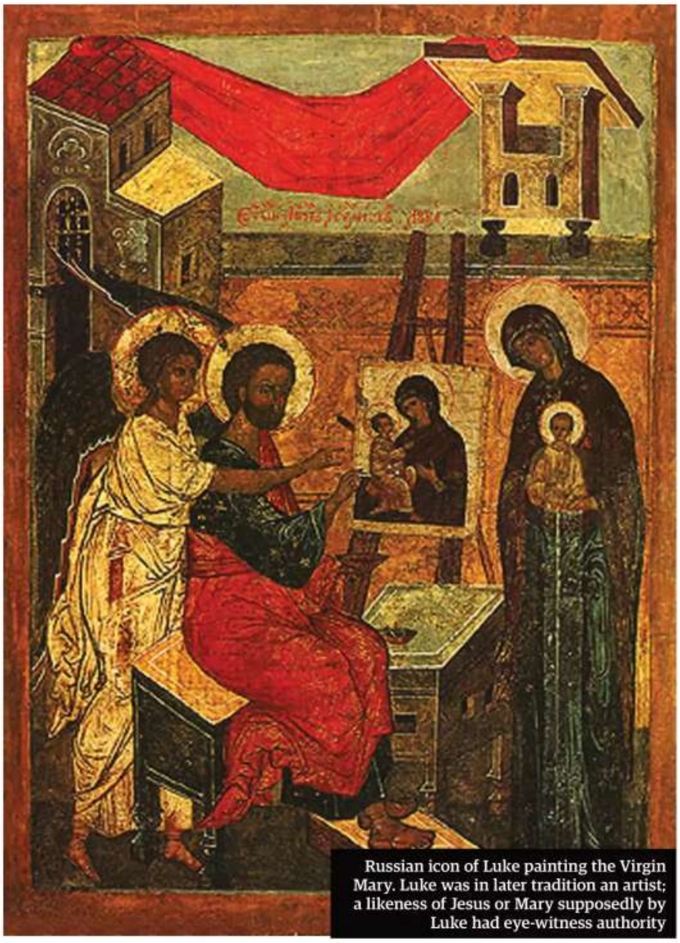
Interpreting the truth

Josephus, greatest of the ancient Jewish historians, wrote briefly about Jesus around 93-4 CE. "About this time," reads Josephus' present text, "there lived a man Jesus, a wise man, if one really ought to call him a man at all. For he was one who did extraordinary works, a teacher of such people as accept truths gladly, and he won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. On the accusation of leading men among us, Pilate condemned him to be crucified; but those who had come in the first place to love him did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day as alive again; and the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the nation of the Christians has still to this day not disappeared" (Antiquities 18.3.3).

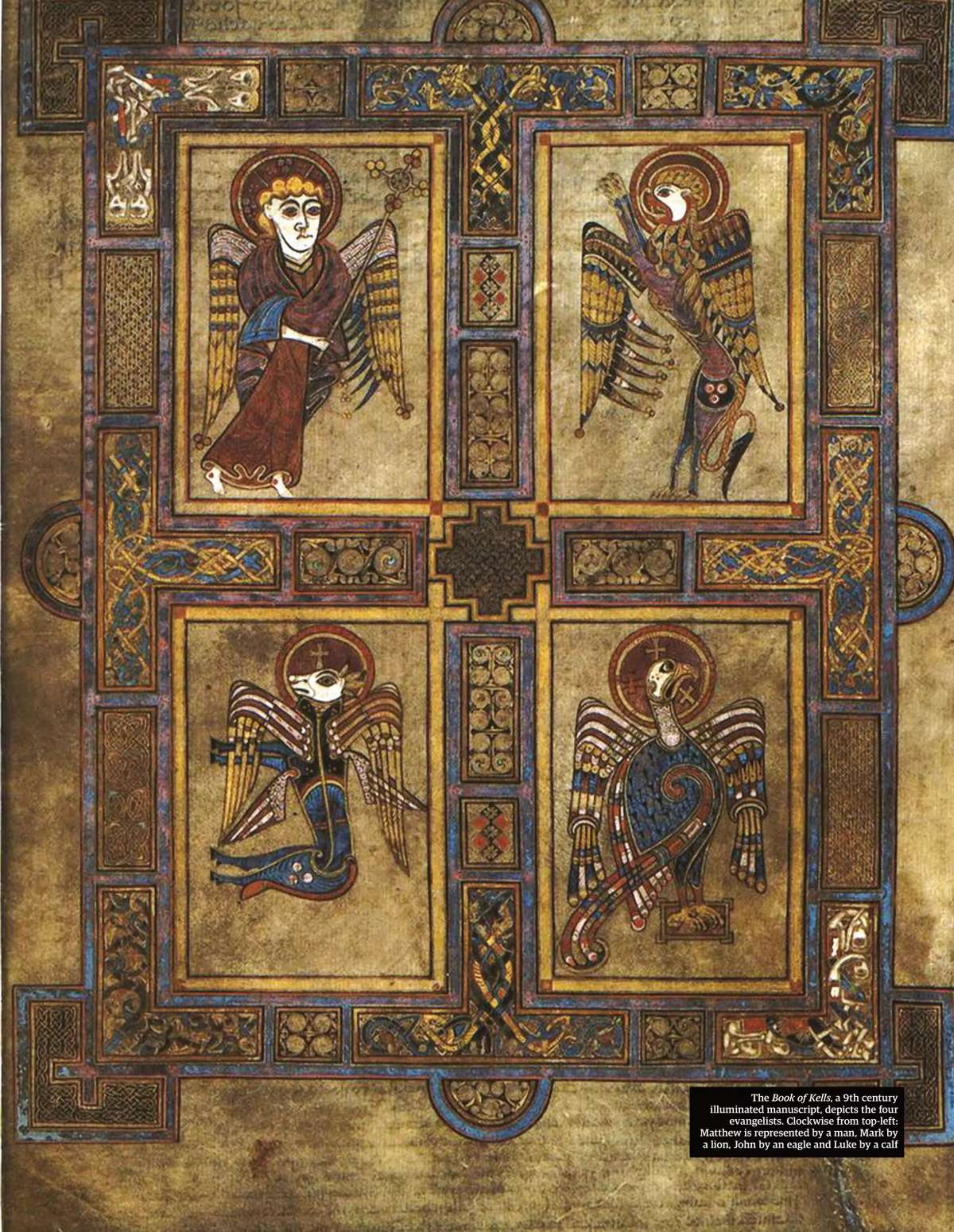
Scholars have long distrusted this eulogy. Perhaps, before a Christian editor got to work on the text, Josephus really said: "About this time, there lived a man Jesus, a clever man. He was one who did strange deeds, a teacher of such people as accept novelties too readily, and he led astray many Jews and many of the Greeks. On the accusation of leading men among us Pilate condemned him to be crucified. And the tribe of the Christians has still to this day not disappeared."



Josephus wrote our fullest account of the Jewish rebellion against Rome, 66-70 CE. Rome's Arch of Titus shows the booty taken from the Temple when Jerusalem fell



Russian icon of Luke painting the Virgin Mary. Luke was in later tradition an artist; a likeness of Jesus or Mary supposedly by Luke had eye-witness authority



The *Book of Kells*, a 9th century illuminated manuscript, depicts the four evangelists. Clockwise from top-left: Matthew is represented by a man, Mark by a lion, John by an eagle and Luke by a calf

SECRET STORIES OF JESUS

Four gospels have been sanctified, while far more were deemed heretical. Their Jesus is a far cry from the Bible's...

Words by Robin Griffith-Jones

‘Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Bless the bed that I lie on.’ Within 150 years of Jesus' death, the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke clearly enjoyed a special authority in the churches all over the Mediterranean. It took the Gospel of John - so different in style and in its presentation of Jesus - rather longer to gain a similar acceptance.

These are the four we have known ever since. But from the 2nd century we also hear of other gospels: the Jewish-Christian gospels of the Nazareans, Ebionites and Hebrews; the gospels of Thomas, Philip and Judas; the gospels of the Twelve, of Basilides, of Matthias - the list could go on. We had, for nearly 2,000 years, just the titles and some tantalising fragments of these books. The texts themselves, clearly disliked and even feared by the early theologians who mention them, had disappeared. There was frankly no hope that we would ever read them for ourselves.

All this has changed dramatically over the past 100 years. Vast quantities of papyrus fragments, preserved in Egypt's dry heat, were unearthed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among them were sections of some early gospels. Only fragments, yes; but far more substantial than any angry quotation from an early theologian. Here, for example, was a long section of the Gospel of Mary, named for Mary Magdalene, who is with Jesus its chief character, highly acclaimed by Jesus himself.

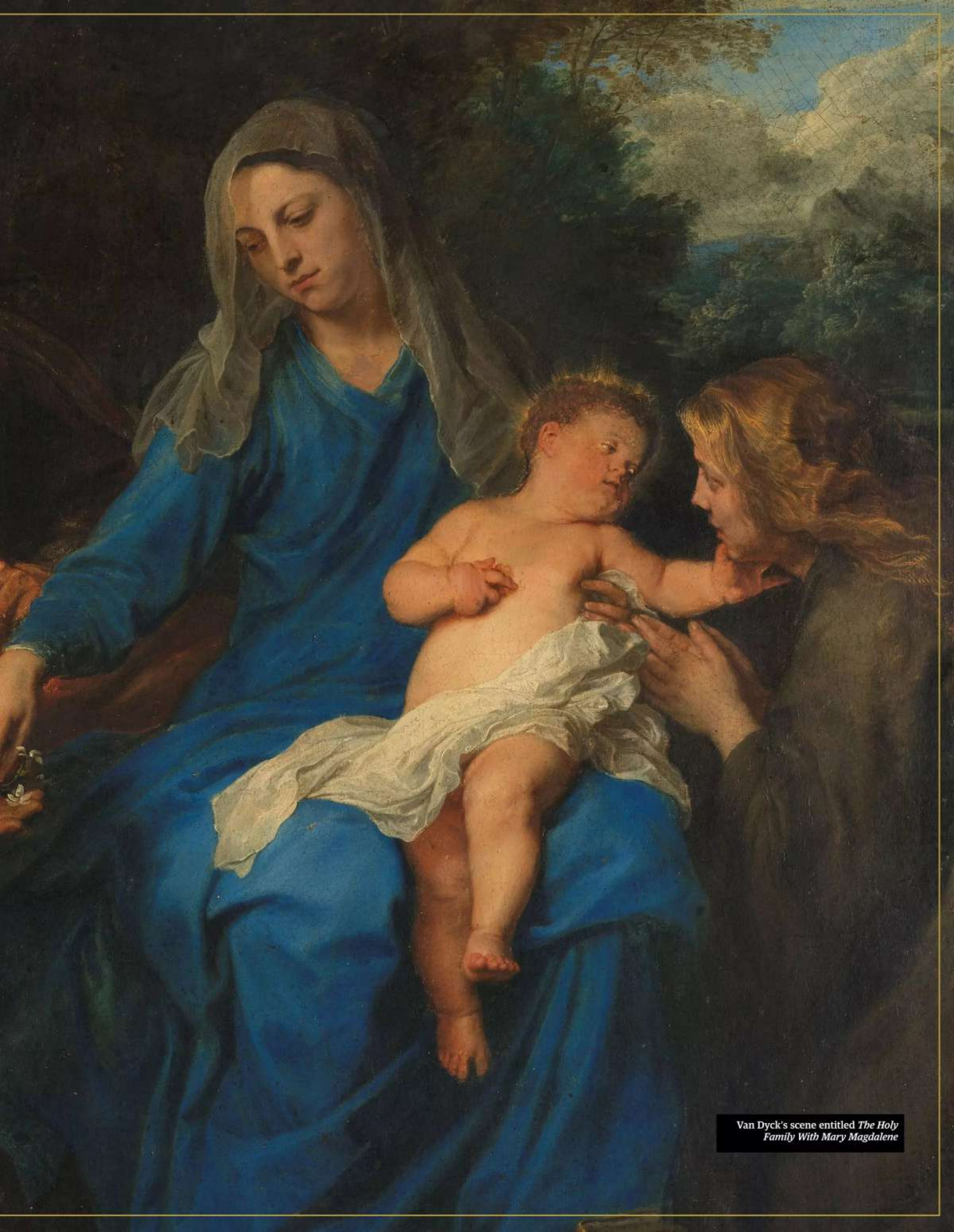
Then came a discovery in 1945 that transformed our whole understanding of these lost gospels: 13 books, from the 3rd or 4th century, found at the foot of a cliff at Nag Hammadi in southern Egypt and gradually brought to the attention of the scholarly world. In all, the books contained over 50 texts. Here at last were the gospels of Philip and of Thomas, which would become the most famous of all the Nag Hammadi texts.

Let's start from the beginning: from those strange fragments preserved by early theologians, through the papyri discovered in the 19th century on to Nag Hammadi, and at last to the Gospel of Judas, a papyrus published only in 2006 and the subject among scholars, ever since, of fascinating disagreement. We must be selective, of course.

THE GNOSTICS: RE-CREATING THE STORY OF CREATION

Almost all the gospels that have re-emerged in the last 100 years can be loosely bundled together as 'Gnostic' texts. The Gnostics (from the Greek 'gnōsis', knowledge) longed for knowledge higher and

> “THE TEXTS, CLEARLY DISLIKED BY THE EARLY THEOLOGIANS, HAD DISAPPEARED”



Van Dyck's scene entitled *The Holy Family With Mary Magdalene* greater, as they believed, than anything generally accessible to humankind.

This knowledge would save them from subjection to the squalid conditions and appetites of the physical world and of our physical selves. The mainstream churches insisted that Jesus had come to save the world and everyone in it. Most Gnostics sought in Jesus their rescue from the world and from its demeaning ways. All these ways were typified by sexual desire and sexual generation, where our rational, spiritual self is overtaken by our bodies' demands. Almost all Gnostic groups distrusted sex; some aimed for its rigorous renunciation. Those so starkly at odds with the world around them were bound to wonder: was the very capacity for such Knowledge, the spiritual seed germinated and growing within them, a rare gift? Those without the gift were in that case inescapably subjected to ignorance and to the world of death.

This is a dark view of the world. It was born of the intellectual anxiety of the 2nd century CE, applied to the creation-story in Genesis. Many of us know the story well. God finished his creation on Day Six and saw that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). The Fall may have then corrupted everything; but everything in all creation was in principle open to redemption and therefore the recovery of its first primordial goodness.

But the Gnostics saw how strange this story actually is. There appears to be more than one God as work: 'we', at Genesis 1:26. In the second story of creation (Genesis 2), the Human (Adam) is made first and then the Woman is moulded from his rib. Now if the Woman could be built up out of Adam, then everything specific to the Woman had once been in Adam too. So Adam had contained in a single person, beyond any distinction into male and female, all that was human.

It then seems bizarrely tyrannical for God to deny to Adam and Eve the knowledge of good and evil without which we are hardly adult or morally responsible humans at all (Genesis 2:17). The serpent was right: the fruit of the forbidden tree did make Adam and Eve like gods (Genesis 3:5, 3:22). The humans needed the Wisdom that God seems to have denied them. The Woman, responsible for the Fall, is thereby responsible for all the Wisdom that follows. She is a subversive, disruptive but utterly creative force. She is indeed 'Eve', "mother of all living things" (Genesis 3:20).

Here are hints of some lesser creation by a second, lower god and his cohorts. This matched the account in Plato's Timaeus, the most famous of all creation-stories in the ancient world, when the great God entrusted to the lesser gods the manufacture of humans' bodies and their lesser, mortal souls. Two gods, then, were surely spoken

"WE ARE INVITED BACK INTO A WORLD THAT HAD BEEN BURIED IN OBLIVION FOR CENTURIES"

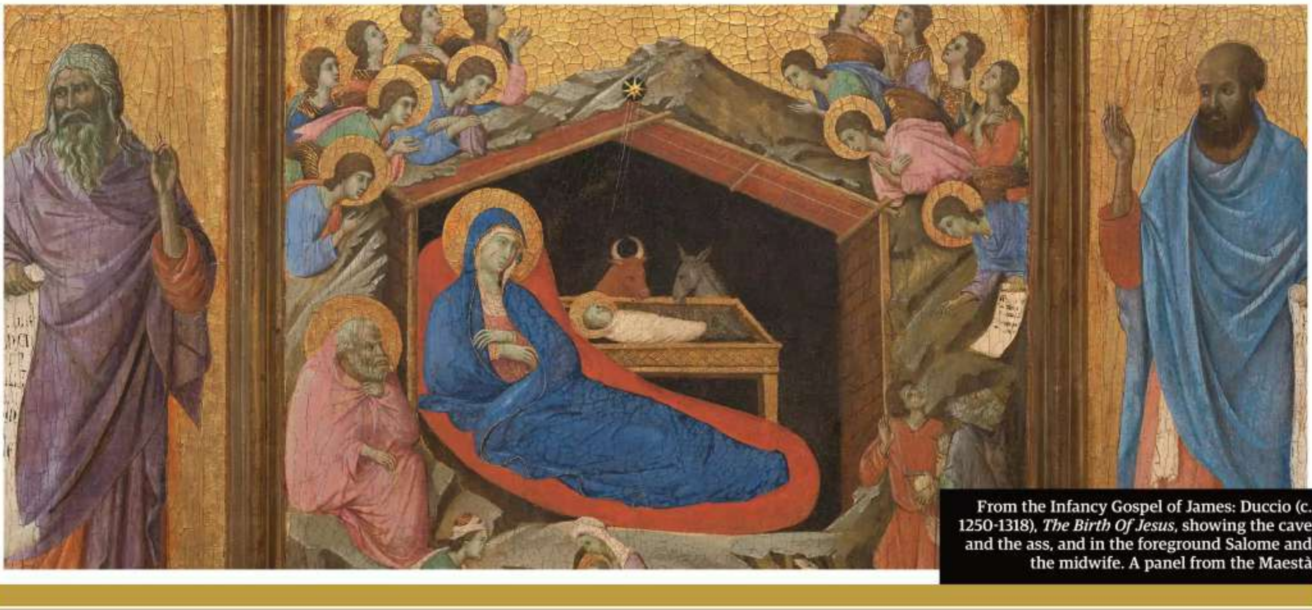
THE INFANCY GOSPEL OF JAMES

Jesus' birth re-written

The story of Jesus' birth in the Infancy Gospel of James has, ever since late antiquity, had limitless influence on depictions, both in mosaic and paint, of Mary's and of Jesus' infancy. The text is known in manuscripts in at least nine languages. Here is a summary of the birth of Jesus. Perhaps its most extraordinary moment is the time of stillness, when time and eternity meet – exactly as they do in a depiction of the scene. The birds fly, workers eat and goats drink from a stream; but all of them are completely still.

Mary had come to full term. Joseph took her down from the ass she was riding, put her to rest in a cave, and found a Jewish midwife "and they stood near the cave and a dark cloud was hovering over the cave. And immediately, the cloud withdrew from the cave and a great light appeared in the cave so that their eyes could not bear it. And a little while later the same light withdrew until an infant appeared."

The midwife met Salome and told her, "Salome, I have to describe this new miracle for you. A virgin has given birth." Salome refused to believe it unless she tested Mary's hymen. She did so; and her hand was instantly consumed in fire. An angel appeared and told her to lift up the child. She did so, and was healed.



From the Infancy Gospel of James: Duccio (c. 1250-1318), *The Birth Of Jesus*, showing the cave and the ass, and in the foreground Salome and the midwife. A panel from the Maestà

The opening page of the Gospel of Thomas

of in Genesis: the supreme God; and a secondary and evil demiurge, who was responsible for creating our world and its irredeemable physical appetites and longings.

Plato had also told of a first, androgynous human, who had all the characteristics of male and female in one. Here too Genesis seems at home. The First Human contained everything that would become male and female; and we ourselves are called to recover the image within ourselves of that First Human and so the image of God. So we were not made for our present sexual division or desires. We will in the fullness of eternity overcome them both, and in our social roles and self-understanding we can in good measure overcome them in this life. We can make our way back to the primordial unity of the First Human.

How strange it is, that in our own time the Gnostics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries have been so attractively re-imagined as the true heirs of Jesus' teaching and example. The Gnostics, in fact, saw around them a foul world to be transcended by the few privileged spirits who could escape it. This is about as far from Jesus' teaching and example as we could imagine. As we shall see, the Gnostics' vision was also profound and sensitive, and the great 20th-century psychiatrist, Jung, found in it a basis for his own system of archetypes. But such an intense dualism, consigning the world at large to an evil demiurge, was in stark opposition to the instincts of the mainstream churches. The Gnostics were suppressed; their texts were lost for centuries.

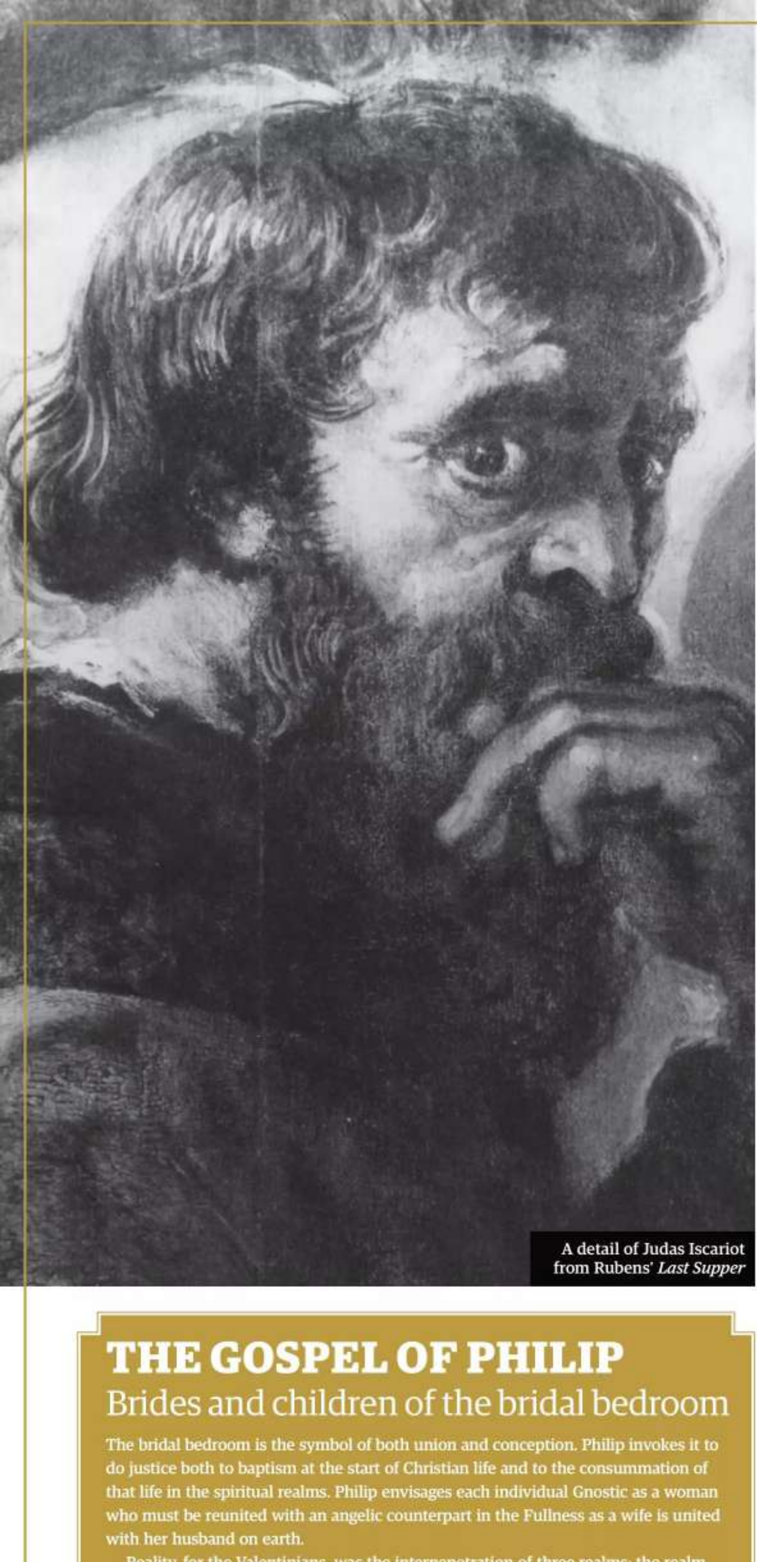
THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS: MAKING MARY MAGDALENE MALE

The Gospel of Thomas from Nag Hammadi is deservedly famous. The gospel was highly valued by some Gnostics, but in itself it is hardly a 'Gnostic' text at all. Its origins and character lie elsewhere, in a mystical Christianity toward the end of the 1st century CE. It was almost certainly written in Syriac, the language of Syria, to the north of Palestine. It was translated into Greek, taken along the trade routes south to Egypt, and translated again into Coptic, the language of almost all our Gnostic texts. For the moment we need to turn our eyes not to the Egyptian-Coptic Gnosticism of the late 2nd century, but to the Syrian mysticism of the 1st.

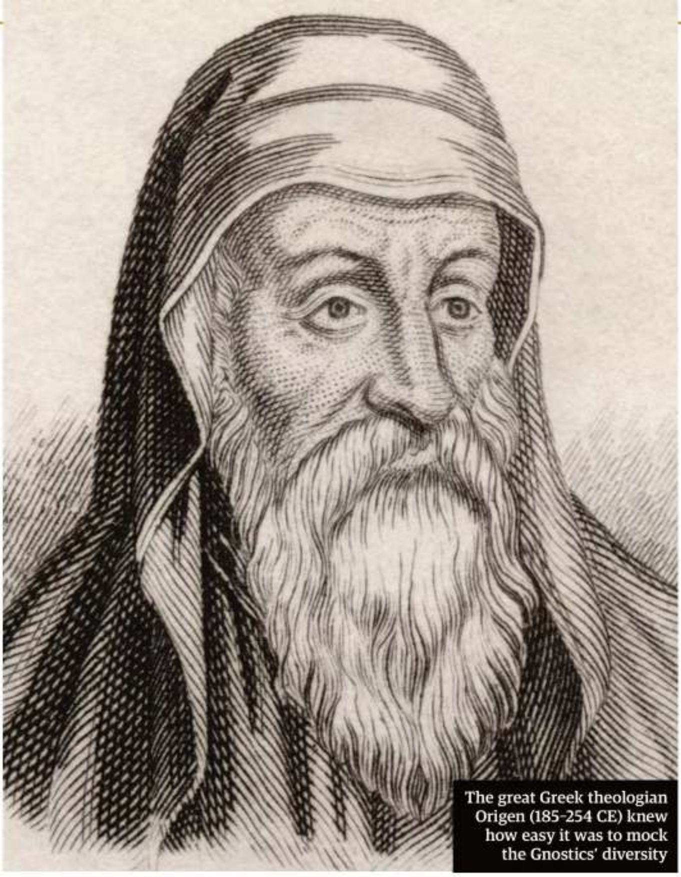
The discovery of Thomas in the desert has a romantic air. Why had it been hidden? By whom? From what danger? We are invited back into a world that had been (literally) buried in oblivion for centuries. Among all the Nag Hammadi texts, Thomas is conveniently short and complete. Its sayings seem accessible to modern readers. We are spared a lot that our generation finds awkward in the biblical accounts of Jesus: there are no miracles to believe in and no talk of Jesus' resurrection.

There is, instead, just a voice of Jesus that we have never heard before. It is mysterious, yes, but it is fresh and bracing and does not reach us through the filter of official doctrine or through the solemn voice of a priest or minister browbeating us in church. "Recognize what is in your sight, and what is hidden from you will become plain to you"; "Split a piece of wood, and I am there; lift up the stone, and you will find me there." Wherever we look, there is Jesus, if only we would open our eyes and see. His kingdom is here and now, around and within his believers. The discovery of this Jesus is the discovery of our own world and of ourselves.

But can we trust this gospel to show us Jesus as he really was? There is certainly an irony in any supposition that Thomas' Jesus is a straightforward human figure unencumbered by the churches' doctrine. 'The living Jesus' of the text is the risen, post-Easter Jesus who will star in all the Gnostic stories. Thomas does not ignore the resurrection, but presumes it. Whoever this Jesus is, he is not



A detail of Judas Iscariot from Rubens' *Last Supper*



The great Greek theologian Origen (185-254 CE) knew how easy it was to mock the Gnostics' diversity

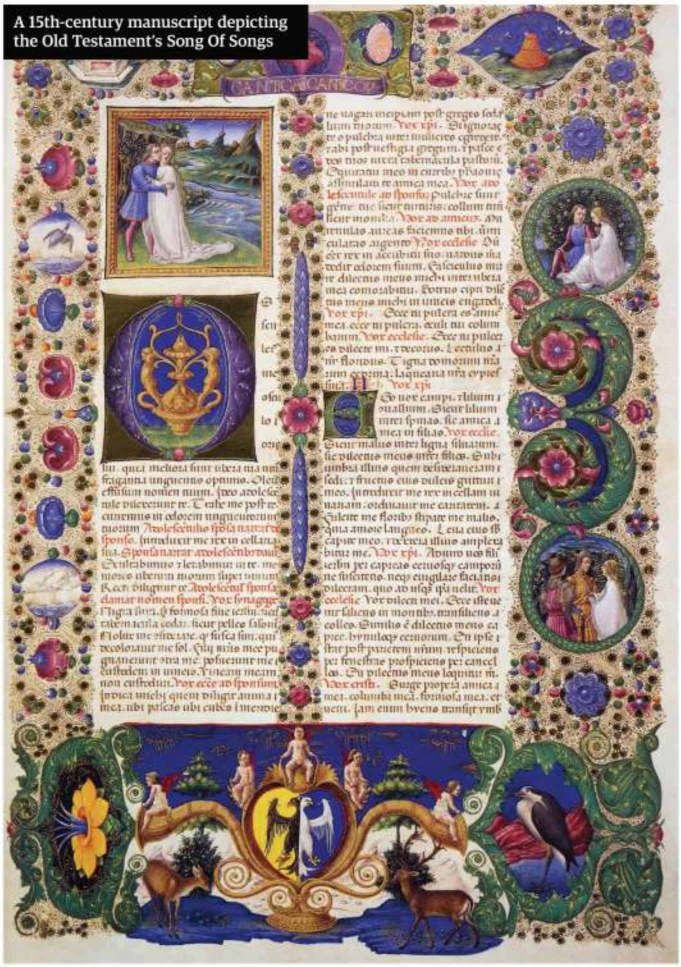
THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP

Brides and children of the bridal bedroom

The bridal bedroom is the symbol of both union and conception. Philip invokes it to do justice both to baptism at the start of Christian life and to the consummation of that life in the spiritual realms. Philip envisages each individual Gnostic as a woman who must be reunited with an angelic counterpart in the Fullness as a wife is united with her husband on earth.

Reality, for the Valentinians, was the interpenetration of three realms: the realm of the Fullness, a spiritual domain which will at some stage be accessible to the Gnostic spirits; the heavenly realms, present home to angels and lower than the Fullness; and the realm of the flesh, in which our bodies trap us. And present in each is the Lord: in the Fullness he is Christ, in heaven he is the Saviour, and on earth he is Jesus. And in each realm he has a female counterpart: in the Fullness, the Spirit itself; in heaven, Wisdom; and on earth, Mary Magdalene. Mary is not just Mary Magdalene; she is one member of a trio of Marys - or one-third of a single Mary - that is related to Christ in each of the three layers of creation.

This is poetry, as much as it is philosophy. "Truth", Philip reminds us, "did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images; the world will not receive truth in any other way."



A 15th-century manuscript depicting the Old Testament's Song Of Songs obviously the warm-hearted, free-spirited sage, human and humane, of modern imagination.

Thomas contains 114 sayings and short dialogues that take place between Jesus and his disciples. So far removed is the gospel's world from our own that we are very hard-pressed to recognise the help that it is offering to its readers or audience: to ascend safely, while still alive, in a mystical journey to heaven, past heaven's aggressive guardians whose task was to repel any unauthorised intruder from our world.

Jesus said, "If they say to you, 'Where did you come from?' say to them, 'We came from the light' - the place where the light came into being on its own accord and established itself and became manifest through their image. If they say to you, 'Is it you?' say, 'We are its children, and we are the chosen people of the living Father.' If they ask you, 'What is the sign of your Father in you?' say to them, 'It is movement and repose'" (Thomas 50).

Rare, privileged Jewish visionaries ascended to heaven before death and were transformed on their journey into creatures suited to their destination. Thomas did not just offer such ascent before death; he demanded it.

Jesus said, "Look for the Living One while you are alive, lest you die and then seek to see him and you will be unable to see him" (Thomas 59).

Those who wait until death for their sight of God will have waited too long; they will never see him. Seek to see him, Thomas exhorts the readers, now.

And what will characterise those souls who do ascend? Thomas looks back to Creation, and to that primordial state in which, it seems, human beings were both male and female. The goal must be the recovery of that first, androgynous perfection:

"Jesus saw babies who were being suckled. He said to his disciples, 'These babies who are being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom.' They said to him, 'Shall we, then, as babies, enter the kingdom?' Jesus said to them, "'When you make the two one, and when you make the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner and the above as the below, and when you make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male and the female not be female... then shall you enter the kingdom" (Thomas 22).

At this early stage in the gospel the reader is told to transcend gender. By the gospel's end, its position is more precise. In the ancient world, the male was represented as warm, dry, airy and spiritual, naturally rising upwards, like fire, towards heaven; the female as cold, moist and heavy, fecund like the fertile earth. The ideal of humanity, then, could not be mere fusion of male and female, but a rise from the female to the spiritual ascent proper and even restricted to the male. And so we reach the final saying of Thomas, in every sense its last word. This is a strange world indeed.

"Simon Peter said to them, 'Let Mary go out from among us, because women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'See, I myself shall lead her, so that I will make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven'" (Thomas 114).

"AT THIS EARLY STAGE IN THE GOSPEL THE READER IS TOLD TO TRANSCEND GENDER"

THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP: MARY MAGDALENE, THE SAVIOUR'S COMPANION

There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother, his sister, and the Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. For Mary is his sister, and his mother, and his partner.

Of Mary Magdalene, we read in the Gospel of Philip that Christ or the Saviour "loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her [...]. The rest of the disciples... said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?'" (Philip 59:6-10; 63:30-64:2).

Mary Magdalene as 'companion' and 'partner', often kissed by Jesus - what were the readers of the Gospel of Philip to make of this? What are we to make of it, come to that? If we speculate what word is missing in the manuscript, we will likely imagine an erotic frisson and guess that Jesus kissed Mary Magdalene often 'on the mouth'. No wonder Philip values, above all other symbols, the symbol of the bridal bedroom; and no wonder, in our own day and age, this has seemed to speak of the marital union of Jesus and Mary.

Philip was compiled in Greek and translated in the 2nd or 3rd century into the Coptic version in which it has survived. There were clearly churches that resented the claims made by and for women, that some women could, thanks to the Wisdom given them by Jesus, wield a spiritual authority greater than men's. Most of all, such opponents would have resented the long-remembered intimacy between Jesus and Mary, which still, a century after her death, lent such authority to her name. This is a gripping story of all too human love and jealousy, but is it really the story behind Philip?

This all leads on to a second speculation. There is a popular impression that Jesus and Mary Magdalene can really be understood when we acknowledge in their relationship all the contours of a 'sacred marriage', familiar in the pagan world, between a god and goddess or between a god or goddess and a mortal, and such marriage was a celebration of sexual energy. What the Gnostics found in the stories about Jesus and Mary they symbolised in the bridal bedroom of Gnostic ritual, and in the stories and rituals alike the Gnostics were celebrating human - and unashamedly sexual - love between man and woman.

Are these indeed the connections shaping Philip? We have not done full justice yet to the roles of woman and men in such mystical and mythical thought. Philip is heavily indebted to the thought of Valentinus. Valentinus came from Egypt to Rome around 136 CE. For Valentinus, every human soul is effectively female, longing for union with its saviour, the male Jesus. The theme was already ancient when Valentinus wrote. The Old Testament's Song Of Songs is a passionate love song, interpreted for centuries as the dialogue between God and the soul or his people. We have no other language adequate to express the passion, yearning and joy that can attend God's love for us and our love for God.

John's Easter story brings this motif to is loveliest form, when Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Jesus in the garden as the light rises on Day One of the new creation. She thinks he is the gardener (as Adam had been the gardener of Eden). He calls her by her name (as Adam in Eden had named all God's creatures). She longs to hold on to him, as the bride in the Song Of Songs had promised to cling to her bridegroom. Mary and Jesus meet in a garden, as the bride and groom had met in the Song Of Songs. John's whole Easter story is a wonderful account - not just of one encounter at one daybreak 2,000 years ago - but of the soul meeting her risen Lord.

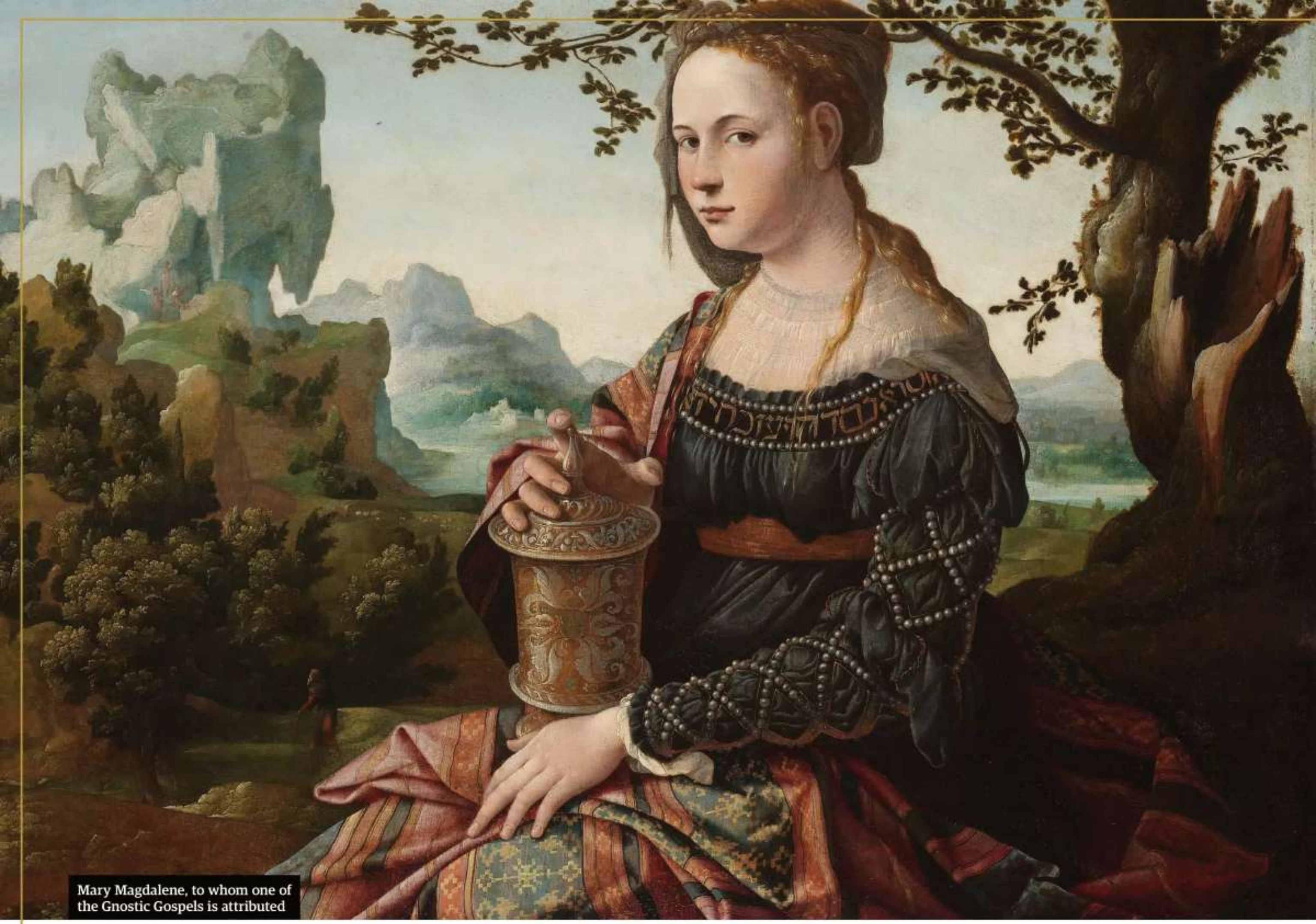
In Philip, the bridal bedroom is a major motif. The present life offers an admission to the bedroom that is a genuine anticipation of the Gnostic's final entry into the bedroom of the spiritual Fullness. There the Gnostic will be united with his or her angelic counterpart for the wedding banquet in heaven. They will then process from the banquet into the bridal bedroom, the ultimate Fullness, for the consummation of their union. Of course this is all spoken in symbols. "Names given to the world are very deceptive, for they divert our thoughts from what is correct to what is incorrect;" and no language or ritual, in itself and in its possible misunderstanding, is more important in Philip than the language and ritual of the bridal bedroom.

THE GOSPEL OF MARY: INTO THE INNER WORLD

The end of the Gospel of Mary is notorious. Simon Peter, the leader of Jesus' disciples, calls upon Mary Magdalene to address them:

"Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Saviour which you remember, which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them."

Mary Magdalene does exactly that. She mentions a vision of Jesus and recalls, in the words of Jesus, how the soul ascends to its proper home. Vision and account had both been granted to her alone. Now Peter, somewhat resentful of this, changes his tune: "Did the Saviour he really speak with a woman without our knowledge and not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?" Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother



Mary Magdalene, to whom one of the Gnostic Gospels is attributed

Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Saviour?"

Levi, another man among Jesus' disciples, breaks in: "Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Saviour made her worthy, who are you to reject her? The Saviour certainly knows her without faltering. That is why he loved her more than us" (Mary 10:1-8; 17:7-18:20).

The authority of Mary Magdalene is disputed by Peter, but she is triumphantly vindicated; not even Peter can persuade his fellow disciples to deny or ignore the privilege Jesus has given her. We interpret the conflict readily: Mary surely represents the women called to leadership in the Gnostic churches, Simon Peter the male leaders who resisted them.

This must be right; but it does not yet do justice to the forms of authority current and disputed in the churches that used this gospel; nor to the nuanced understanding of knowledge in its different sources and forms.

The gospel had described, near its beginning, Jesus' final instructions to his disciples. Then he leaves them. Then Mary stood up, embraced them and kissed them all, and said to her brothers, "Do not weep and do not grieve, nor be irresolute, for his grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into humans." When Mary said this, she turned their hearts inward to the Good, and they began to discuss the sayings of the Saviour (Mary 9:12-24).

Before he left, Jesus had kissed the disciples; so does Mary. Jesus urged the disciples to follow the Son of the Human One within themselves; Mary reassures them that he has made them into humans. Mary, a woman, takes the role of Jesus, speaks as Jesus spoke, and reaffirms his instruction. Expectations are being deliberately overturned. Men were thought of as stable and rational, women as labile, tearful, and fearful; but here the men are making themselves womanly, and the woman is showing herself manly. She is becoming the true human being that is the Son of the Human One within her.

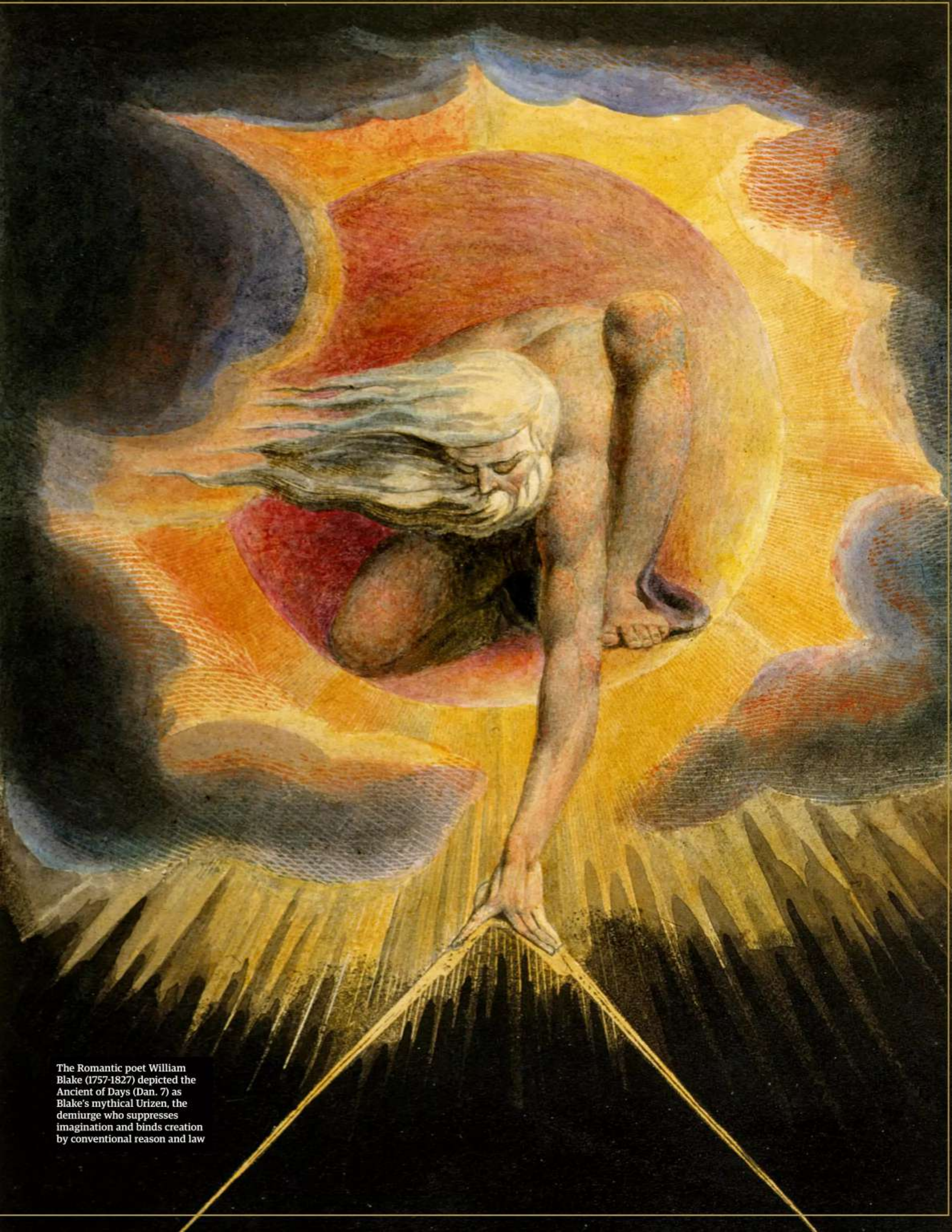
Mary has already stood up in a gesture of authority, spoken, and swayed the disciples to follow her instruction. She needed, it seems, no permission to do so. Now Peter invites her to teach again; he clearly expects (and is presumably expected) to exercise some control over the course of such a discussion. The text acknowledges two centres of authority: Simon Peter, the chairman in executive command, and Mary Magdalene, possessed of special knowledge and representing the Saviour. Mary, ideal believer and spokesperson for Jesus himself, is a woman.

Fragments of Mary have reached us in Greek and in Coptic. In the Greek story, Mary speaks out, is rebuffed, vindicated - and finally left aside; Levi has the last word. But our Coptic text gives to Mary, right at the end, her due. Into a world of men's voices and men's texts that shout down the teaching of women as improper in principle and heretical in practice, our author has sent this short story with a simple closing declaration: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARY.

MEN AND WOMEN AMONG THE GNOSTIC LEADERS

The Nag Hammadi texts were hidden in a desert cave near a known monastery of the 4th century. It was natural in the first years after their discovery to surmise a link with the monastery, but recent research suggests that the manuscripts were neither produced nor used there. Almost every writing from Nag Hammadi is the work, in its present form, of successive editors, compilers, and translators active over the course of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The texts as they have reached us do not form a well-built monument to a single creed or church, but are like a jumble of stones cut from a variety of rocks, all produced by the same geological traumas of the past, but endlessly varied in shape and texture.

The great Greek theologian Origen (185-254 CE) knew how easy it was to mock the Gnostics'



The Romantic poet William Blake (1757-1827) depicted the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7) as Blake's mythical Urizen, the demiurge who suppresses imagination and binds creation by conventional reason and law diversity. In this part of his defence against the pagan Celsus (who had written around 178), we have put the likely quotations from Celsus in italics. Origen writes:

"We may admit also that a *third kind* [of Christian] *exists, and they call some natural and others spiritual;* I think Celsus means the Valentinians. Let us admit that *there are some too who profess to be 'Knowers';* but those cannot be Christians who introduce strange new ideas which do not harmonise with the traditional doctrines received from Jesus. Celsus *knows also of Marcellians who follow Marcellina and Harpocratians who follow Salome and others who follow Mariamme and others who follow Martha*" (Origen, Against Celsus, from 5:61-62).

That list of leaders is intriguing: Marcellina, Salome, Mariamme, and Martha - all of them women. How interesting it is that there were groups appealing so strongly to the distinctive teaching or role of the women - Salome, Mariamme, and Martha - who actually knew Jesus. Marcellina is at the front of Celsus' list, although she lived long after the New Testament's women; she must have been a prominent figure. Irenaeus (130-202 CE) writes of her as among the self-designated Gnostics who encouraged magic and a wildly libertine life; she came to Rome "and led multitudes astray". Her particular sect, we read, set up and crowned images of Christ, Pythagoras, Plato, and other philosophers.

Tertullian (160-220 CE) wrote angrily about the heretics who offered their special knowledge. There is much of interest in his onslaught, about meetings, their openness and also their apparent lack of hierarchy; however our own eyes will be drawn to the status of the women:

"Even if non-Christians attend, they cast the holy to the gods and pearls, though false ones, to the swine... They are all conceited, they all promise 'Knowledge'. The catechumens are 'perfect' before they have even been taught. Even the heretical women - how brazen they are! - are bold enough to teach and to discuss, to perform exorcisms, to promise healings, perhaps even to baptize" (Tertullian, Against The Heretics 41).

For students of women's roles in the early churches, the apocryphal gospels at Nag Hammadi are a treasure trove. There is something immensely appealing, to our ears, in this Mary Magdalene, who is a visionary, spirit-filled, given deep understanding, and opposed by the patriarchal Simon Peter. This Gnostic Mary serves our modern agenda well. She is surely portrayed by these Gnostic texts with the gifts some women in Gnostic communities actually had and exercised. These women can themselves become for us icons of women in the ancient and the modern androcentric world; they are opposed by men but unbowed, and are gifted with insight that hierarchical, hidebound men could then - and can now - hardly share or understand.

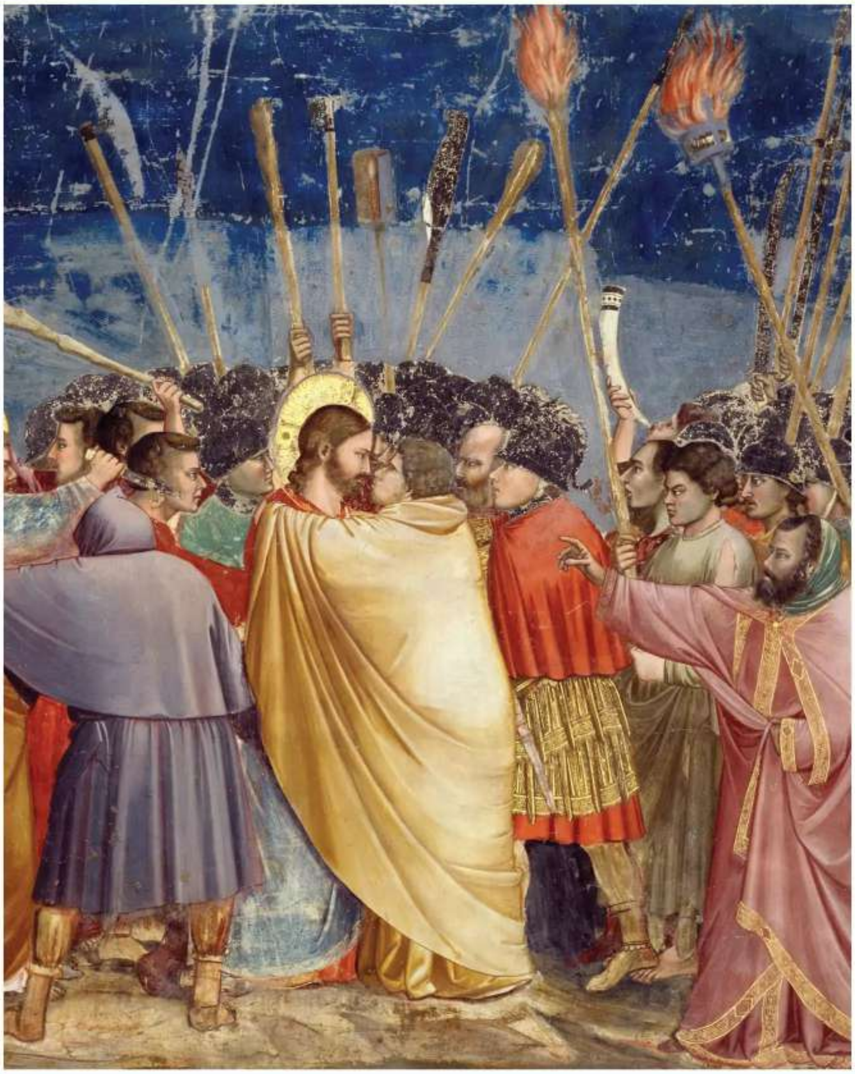
We readily think of visionary knowledge as the preserve of inspired individuals who are reacting against the institutions of religion. In the ancient world (and in much of the world's history since)

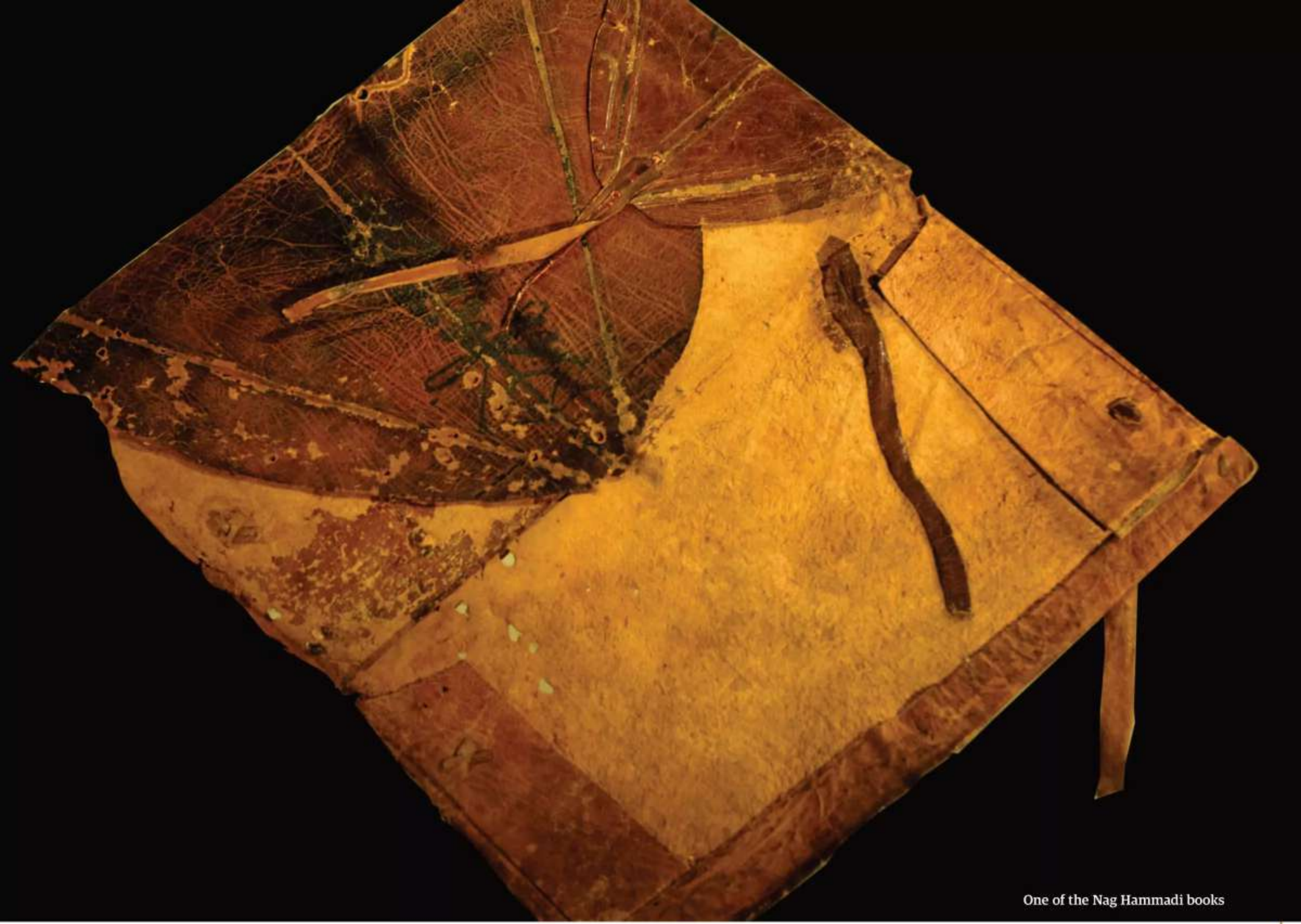
THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS
Rehabilitating Judas Iscariot?

In the 1970s a papyrus copy was found of the long-lost Gnostic Gospel of Judas. For 30 years it was offered for sale through various intermediaries in a bizarre series of deals and attempted deals. In 2006 the saga ended: The Gospel of Judas was published at last, in a beautiful scholarly edition and supported by trade-books and programmes on TV. Here was a Judas Iscariot for our own age. No longer the despised traitor of mainstream tradition, he emerged here as the perfect enlightened Gnostic who ascended to the holy generations. Jesus wanted Judas to betray him, for he wanted to escape the material world. Judas, then, performed a righteous act by his betrayal, and will be able to enter the divine realm as the '13th' disciple who surpasses the other 12. No wonder the publication was warmly welcomed: this was in every way a dazzling rediscovery.

Within a year, however, other scholars of Gnosticism were disputing every one of these claims about the Judas of Judas. These further scholars parsed and translated the vital sentences in an almost opposite sense. Judas was a demon who will lament and mourn his fate. He was separated from the holy generation and will never ascend to it. He could not enter the heavenly house, and did the worst thing he could do by his sacrifice of Jesus. The discussion goes on.

The revisionists admire the first scholars immensely. Quite rightly, nobody really wants to ask if, in the first publication, a wish ended up being the father of the thought: a newly heroic Judas from the 2nd century CE would break the mould of a stale Christian tradition and bring an old (and prominently Jewish) antihero back into the light.





One of the Nag Hammadi books

such constraints were imposed more drastically upon women than upon men. No wonder there were women among the Gnostics who became prophets or seers, and no wonder the men whose power restrained them resented this threat to male supremacy. The voices of Gnostic women were opposed at the time and have been silenced for centuries since.

Heard again at last, they could very easily be modern voices; the battles those women had to fight are the battles women are still fighting today. And the voices of women are represented in the Gnostic texts by Mary Magdalene; the voices of the institutional, patriarchal churches that resent them, by Simon Peter.

So far; so good; even if this overview needs a bit of refining. But the apocryphal gospels offer us greater wisdom than this. Their Gnostics thought profoundly about male and female in the whole order of creation and of humankind. Hierarchies of power would properly represent and realise those relationships. What mattered, first and foremost, was to understand those relationships. While it is fair to say that few of us now would adopt the views of the Gnostics; few of us have thought so deeply about such things for ourselves as the Gnostic writers did, in their beleaguered churches, 1,700 years ago.

A view of the hills at Nag Hammadi, where the books were discovered

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD

Translated versions of the biblical texts can lead to scholarly tantrums, schisms, and vengeful persecution

Words by Jon Wright

In 1962, TS Eliot penned a scathing review of the recently published New English Bible. He informed the readers of the *Sunday Telegraph* that this latest biblical translation "astonishes in its combination of the vulgar, the trivial and the pedantic" as well as raising the question of "what is happening to the English language". He bemoaned the "monotonous inferiority of phrasing", seeing this as "an active agent of decadence."

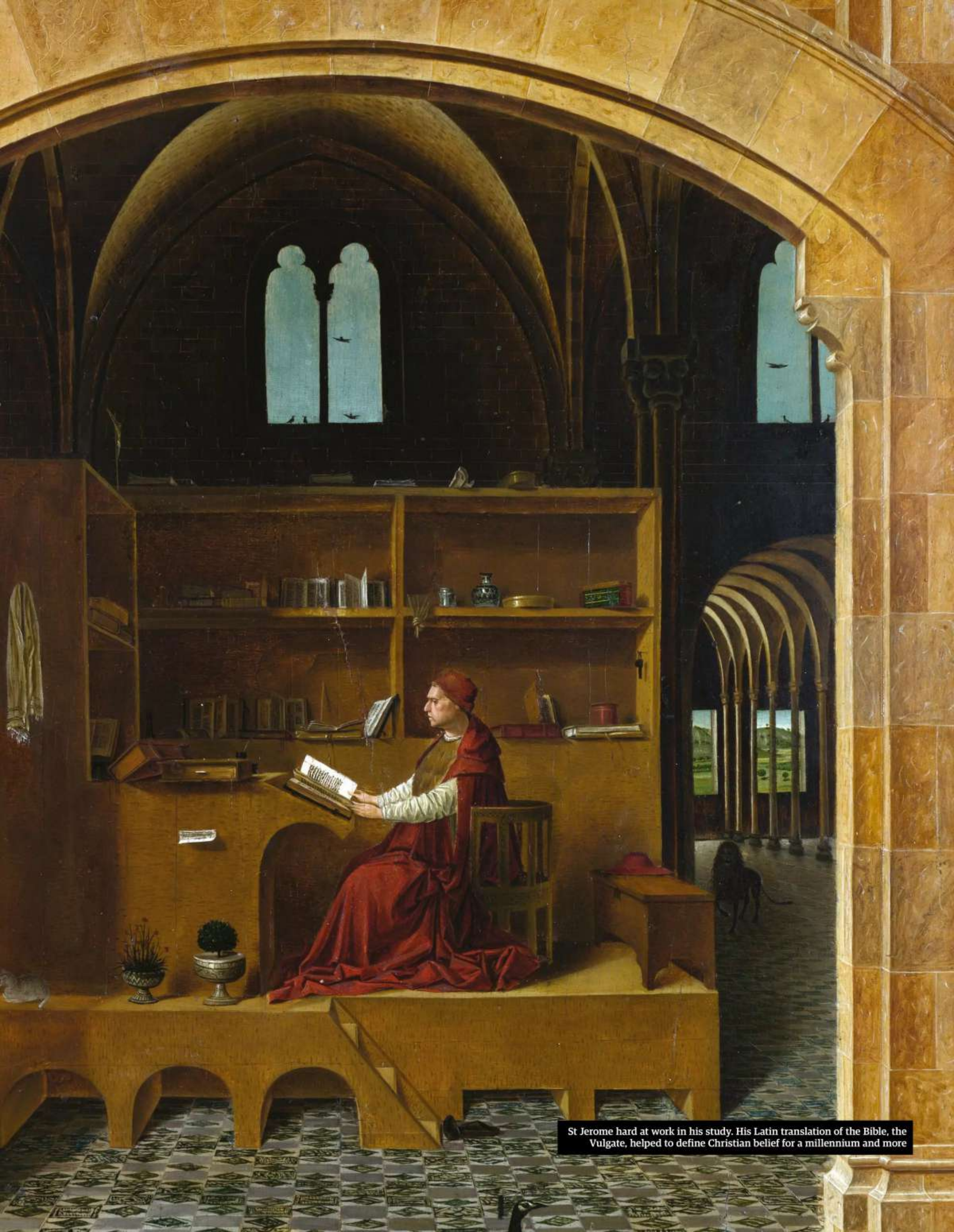
Eliot was at pains to stress that he was approaching the topic from a purely stylistic perspective: it was the linguistic infelicities that irked him and theological gripes were not part of his remit. How things appeared to have changed! For well over a millennium, more had been at stake than literary taste. The question of how scripture ought to be translated, of who should do the translating, and of whether translation was a worthwhile or perilous pursuit had provoked fierce arguments and schisms within the Jewish and Christian faiths. Every now and then, such debates had cost people their lives.

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

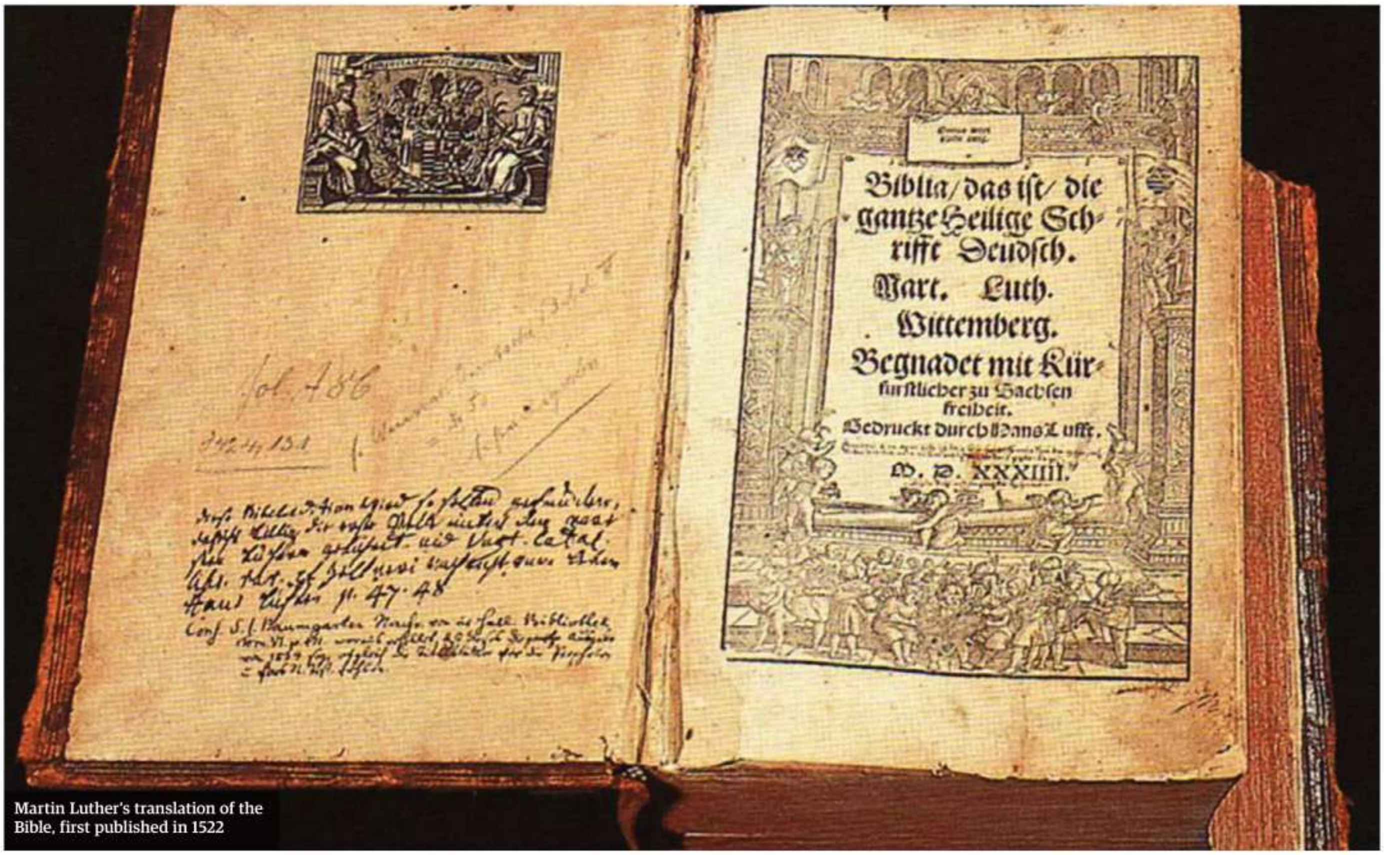
The first great translation project came about in the 3rd century BCE. The Jewish scriptures (what Christianity would come to know as the Old Testament) were written in Hebrew, with a little Aramaic thrown in here and there. Oral translations into other languages had not been uncommon but by the 3rd century BCE it seemed wise to produce a formal, written translation into Greek. This made excellent sense, as it would help the Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora of the eastern Mediterranean. The details are hazy. Tradition holds that Ptolemy II Philadelphus, a ruler of Ancient Egypt, arranged for 72 scholars to assemble in Alexandria and that, in just 72 days, they completed the task of translating their texts. This, of course, seems highly unlikely, and the process certainly took a good deal more time, involved a larger number of experts and probably took place in a constellation of cities.

The myth was important, however. It told of the assembled scholars pursuing their work in isolation but all of them, to a man, coming up with identical Greek renderings of the Hebrew texts. This surely suggested that their efforts were divinely sanctioned: that the new translation was accurate and authentic. This has been the boast of most biblical translations ever since. Whatever really happened in 3rd-century-BCE Alexandria, the text that emerged, the so-called Septuagint, had a profound and lasting impact on religious history. As well as guiding the Greek-speaking Jewish communities, it also played a crucial role in Christianity's early success.

Judaism's encounter with scriptural translation was always complicated. For some, the very act of moving beyond the Hebrew versions seemed inappropriate and, from the 7th to 9th centuries CE, the so-called Masoretic text was compiled, regarded by many as the authoritative version of holy writ. For others, translation remained a crucial task: from the Spanish verses of the Ferrara Bible, produced in 1553, to the 18th-century German translations of Moses Mendelssohn. But as heated as Jewish debates over the methods, or even the rectitude, of



St Jerome hard at work in his study. His Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, helped to define Christian belief for a millennium and more



Biblia/das iſt/ die
gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudſch.
Mart. Luth.
Wittemberg.
Begnadet mit Kürfürſtlicher zu Sachſen freiheit.
Gedruckt durch Hans Lufft.
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Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, first published in 1522

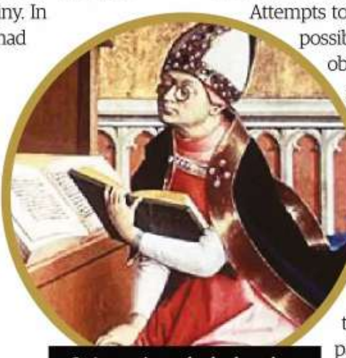
scriptural translation might have been, they paled in comparison with the quarrels that would blight, and enliven, Christianity.

MAKING THINGS LATIN

The Christian faith was greatly assisted by the existence of the Septuagint. It meant that Greek-speakers beyond the Middle East were already familiar with the monotheistic texts of Judaism when Christianity arrived upon the scene, and this was enormously helpful for the early pioneers who sought to spread word of the new faith. As Christianity moved west, however, Latin translation became a priority. This began to happen quite quickly, though only sections of scripture were tackled and, inevitably, many variants emerged. Saint Jerome, who would attempt to tame the chaos, complained that there were "almost as many forms of the text as there are copies".

Jerome was a figure of momentous importance in the early Church, but he will always be best remembered for his biblical translations. He began his translating work in 382 and, while he used the Greek versions of scripture as his starting point, he realised that returning to the Hebrew originals was crucial. Some doubt has been cast on Jerome's command of Hebrew, but it seems likely that he was more than competent and he summed up his methodology rather elegantly: "If you are incredulous, read the Greek and Latin manuscripts and compare them with these poor efforts of mine, and wherever you see they disagree, ask some Hebrew in whom you can have more faith." Saint Jerome spent more than 20 years on his Latin version of the Bible, the Vulgate, and it would reign supreme as the Christian Bible of choice for well over a millennium.

Not that everyone was delighted by every editorial decision Jerome had made - even the tiniest detail came under scrutiny. In one passage in Jonah, Jerome had translated a Hebrew word into Latin as 'ivy' not as 'gourd', which had been the usual choice in the past. Bizarre as it may seem, this provoked uproar. Jerome wrote to Augustine that "a worthy bishop narrowly escaped losing his charge through the clamorous tumult of his people, which was caused by the different translation of this one word". Augustine, perhaps the most celebrated of the early Christian theologians (and an advocate of relying on the Septuagint), was unsettled and made the point that veering from conventional translations would only cause confusion among the faithful: their "ears and hearts have become accustomed" to what had come before. Here, assuredly, was a harbinger of the translation squabbles that would erupt periodically throughout Christian history. Biblical translation, it seems, could be a tricky business.



St Augustine, who had qualms about Jerome's approach to biblical translation

PLEASING THE CROWDS: VERNACULAR TRANSLATIONS

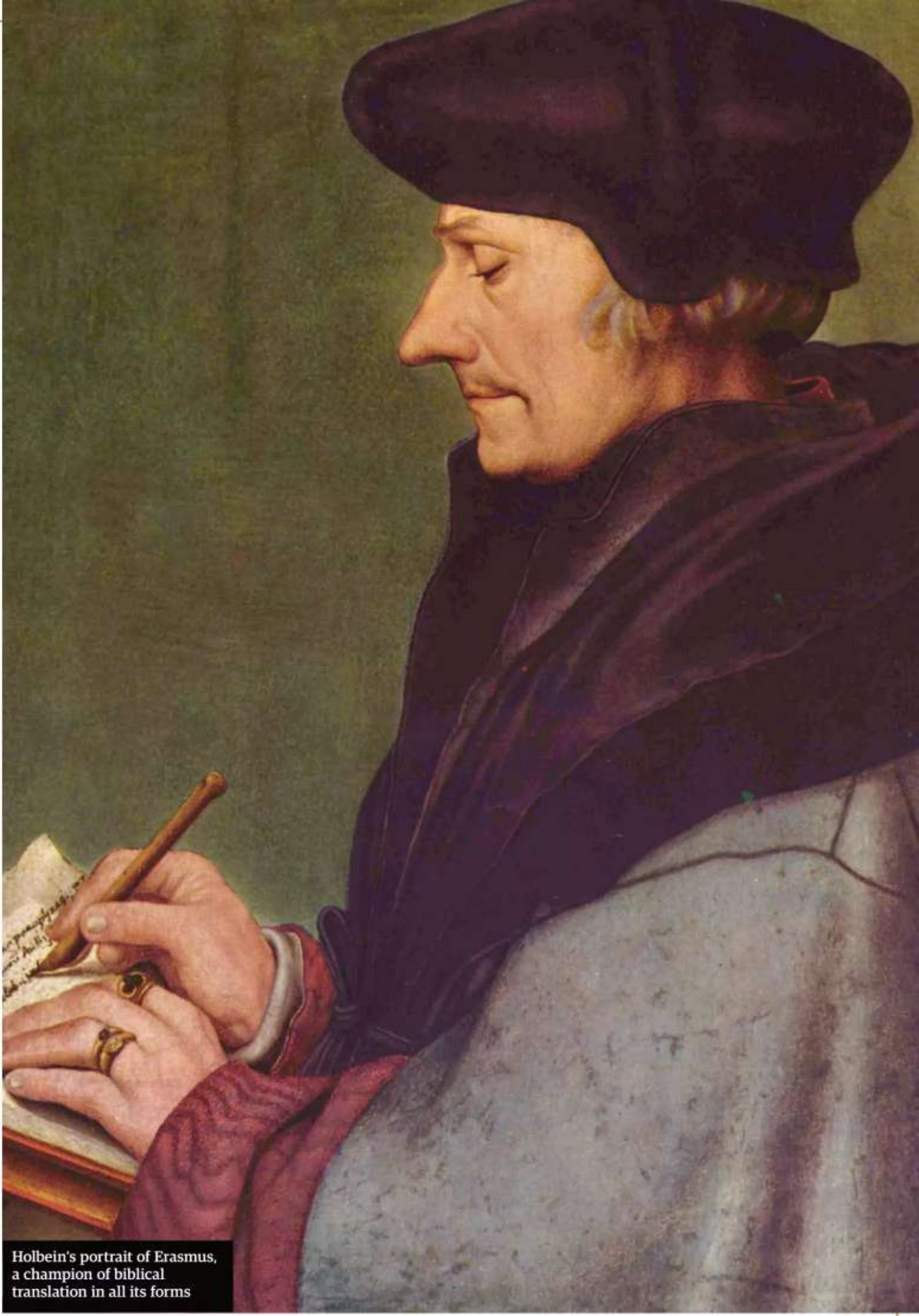
Attempts to produce as accurate a Bible as possible has long been a Christian obsession. In the 3rd century, the great, if rather controversial, theologian Origen produced his Hexapla, in which versions of scriptural passages in six different translations were placed side by side on the page. The logic behind the project was that any discrepancies might be spotted and subsequently tidied up, and indeed, for the most part, the delicate art of biblical translation remained a scholarly pursuit. But we should not imagine that efforts to bring scripture to wider audiences, in a language with which they were familiar, was an invention of the 16th-century Reformation. The vernacular road had already been well-travelled by then.

In the 4th century, the missionary Ulfilas provided the Goths north of the Danube (in present-day Romania and Bulgaria) with translations in their native tongue and these would be taken west by the Visigoths and Ostrogoths to Spain, Italy and southern Gaul. Crucially, Ulfilas and his assistants had to create a new alphabet in order to commit their efforts to paper and one of the seeds of European linguistic history was sown. Much the same could be said of Cyril and Methodius who, as part of their evangelical efforts in eastern Europe, essentially invented the Slavonic alphabet. Similar tales of codifying and standardising languages by means of local biblical translations could be told of Syrian, Coptic, Georgian and Armenian.

At the same time, such moves towards vernacular Bibles were often seen as potentially subversive. Were the common folk really equipped for the task of contemplating scripture, or might it not be wiser to have them mumble along in Latin and have everything that truly mattered explained to them by their clerical betters? During the 10th century, Ælfric of Eynsham was asked to translate Genesis. He complied, but warned that such a task was "very dangerous for me or anyone to undertake, because I fear that if someone foolish reads it, or hears it read", they might think that the stringent morals and laws of the age of Moses should be applied, literally, in the present day. With Genesis behind him, Ælfric announced that "I dare not, nor desire, to translate any other book from Latin into English".

The pace of vernacular translation certainly slowed during the Medieval period, though it never really ground to a halt. Bede tackled John's Gospel on his death bed, Alfred the Great translated some of the Psalms during the 10th century, and the 12th-century Wessex Gospels offered the main attractions of the New Testament in a west Saxon dialect. The 13th century proved to be a particularly vibrant period for translations into Old French and German. The trouble, so far as the ecclesiastical authorities were concerned, was that vernacular scriptures had an annoying habit of emanating from, or inspiring, dissent.

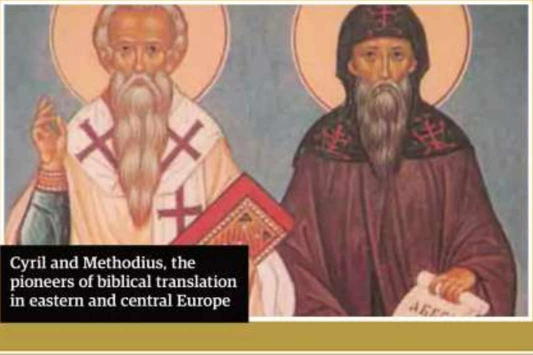
For the self-styled syndics of orthodoxy, John Wycliffe exemplified this regrettable trend. Wycliffe was an obscure Oxford academic who turned out to

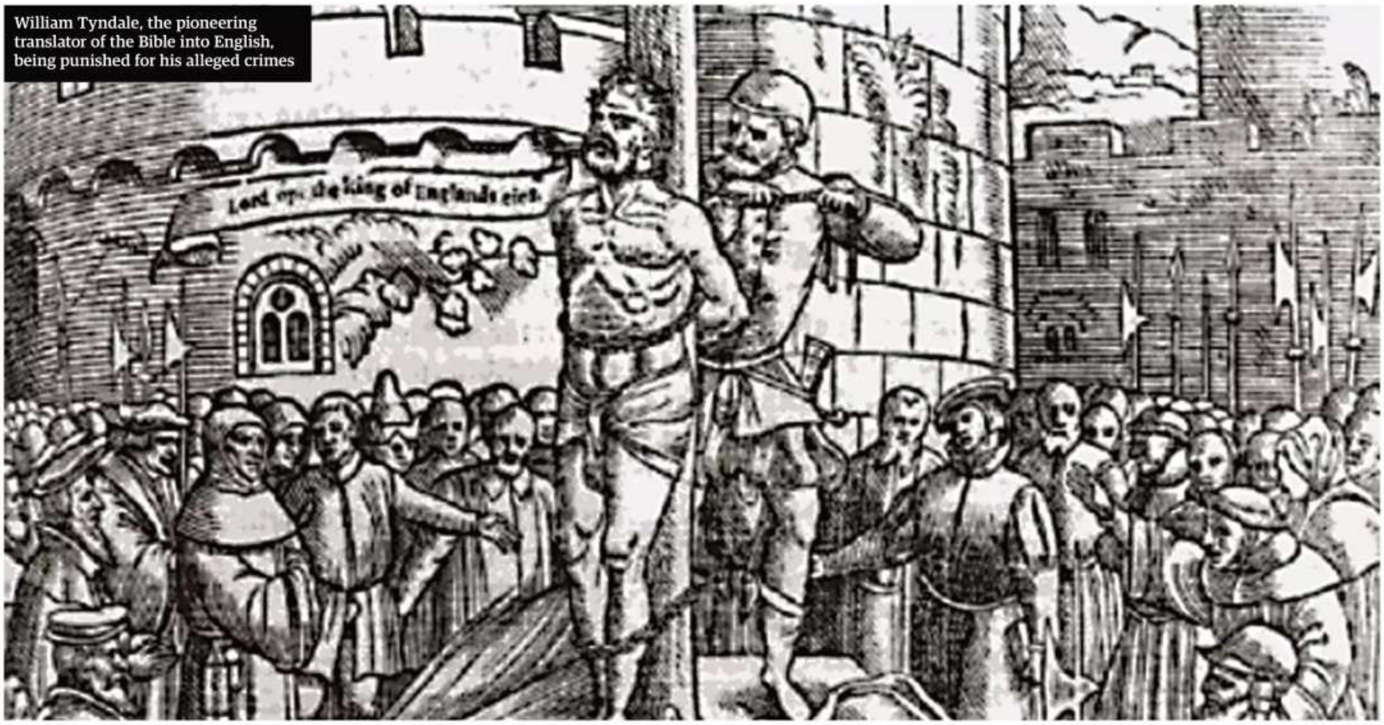

Holbein's portrait of Erasmus, a champion of biblical translation in all its forms

CYRIL, METHODIUS AND THE SLAVS

Translation could help create new languages

Christianity's expansion into central and eastern Europe was a fitful affair. Two of the great evangelical pioneers in the region were Cyril and Methodius, brothers from Thessalonica. Well-established in 9th-century Byzantium, they were asked to undertake a crucial missionary project. In 862, the ruler of Moravia made an urgent plea: "Send us teachers who can make known the words of scripture and their sense." The brothers were happy to take on the task. Unfortunately, they encountered a largely oral culture so some intellectual and linguistic initiative was required. In their efforts to bring the Bible to the Slavic peoples in written form, they had to devise a whole new script: Glagolithic. Their story also reflects a recurrent theme in biblical translation: which language ought to be used? For decades, local rulers and clerics quarreled over the Latin and Slavonic translations. In the end Slavonic won, and Cyril and Methodius are still the focus of national holidays in Macedonia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia.


Cyril and Methodius, the pioneers of biblical translation in eastern and central Europe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William Tyndale, the pioneering translator of the Bible into English, being punished for his alleged crimes

be one of the 14th century's most notorious heretics. He questioned, among much else, the validity of papal authority, the true meaning of the Eucharist and the entire apparatus of Christian monasticism. He and his followers, the Lollards, were particularly keen on bringing English translations to fruition.

The precise role played by Wycliffe in these efforts, that were begun in the early 1380s, is unclear, but one archbishop of Canterbury had no doubts as to Wycliffe's supposed crime. He was called that "pestilent wretch of damnable memory... disciple of Antichrist who, as the complement of his wretchedness, invented a new translation of the scriptures into his mother tongue".

Ahead of his death in 1384, Wycliffe found himself condemned both by the pope and by a local ecclesiastical council at Oxford in 1382. His legacy was deemed so harmful that, many years later, his body was dug up, burned, and his ashes thrown into the River Swift.

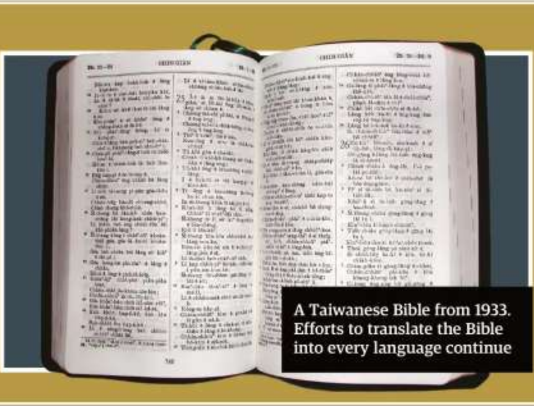
The association between heresy and vernacular biblical translations gathered steam during the Medieval period. The Cathars were eager translators of some scriptural passages and Jan Hus, a man greatly influenced by Wycliffe, was a keen proponent of translations into Czech. Hus, for this and many other alleged heterodox activities, would be put to death in 1415. Not that the principle of biblical translation was necessarily regarded as illicit - it all depended on who was doing the translating. The humanist movement that blossomed during the late 15th and early 16th centuries often saw value in such endeavours. Erasmus, for instance, was mainly concerned with translation at a rarified scholarly level, poring over the ancient languages, and seeking to return to the sources: his priority was identifying the errors made by generations of translators and scribes. Far better, as he put it, "to draw from the fount rather than the muddy ponds and rivulets". He did, however, advocate an even more radical approach. It would be marvellous, he once wrote, to allow "even all women to read the gospel and the epistles of Paul", and hoped that one day "the farmer may sing parts of them at his work, and the weaver may chant them at his shuttle".

Such talk was commonplace in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Another leading humanist, John Colet, happily translated scriptural passages into English for his students and congregations, while Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples embarked upon a major French translation project a few decades later. By then, however, the Protestant Reformation had arrived and the whole issue of biblical translation had become a deeply controversial issue.

MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

How many translations will we have by 2025?

At the dawn of the new millennium, a daunting task was undertaken. The Vision 2025 project aimed to provide translations of the Bible into every language on the planet: it calculated that no fewer than 7,000 spoken languages qualified for consideration. Naturally, translations into many languages already existed but, at present, 2,200 translation projects are underway and a further 1,700 are planned. The work has been greatly helped by technological advances. The project has its detractors: is it an exercise in evangelical intrusion? But its organisers insist that they constantly pay attention to local sensibilities and are only attempting to bring the Word to people in what they call "heart languages" - the speech and cadences of local populations across the world. They are simply following, they say, the example of John Whitgift. Recent recipients of a translation of the New Testament include speakers of the Baka language in Sudan (a feat accomplished despite the turmoil of civil war) and the Roviana people of the Solomon Islands.



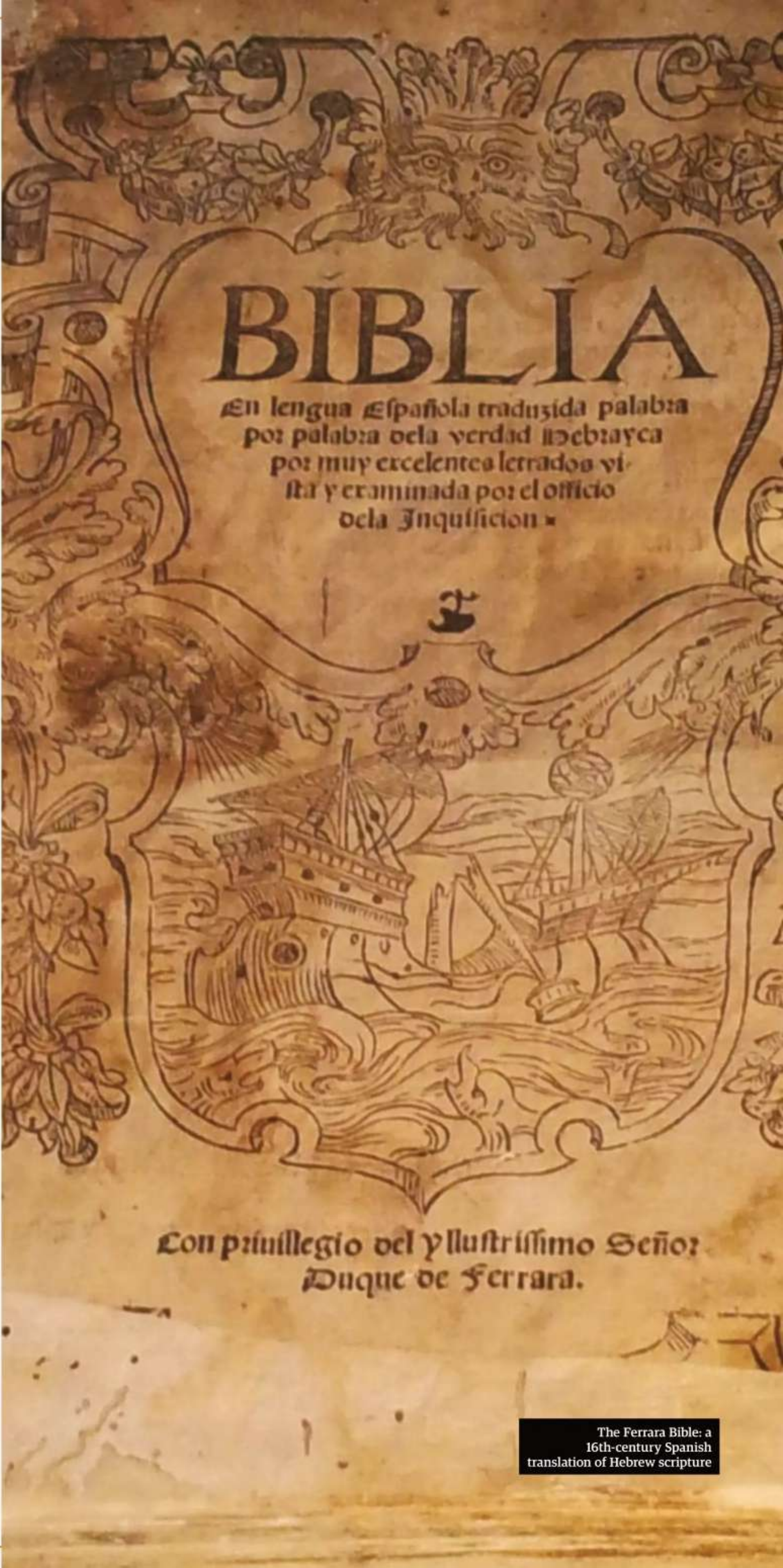
A Taiwanese Bible from 1933. Efforts to translate the Bible into every language continue

A central plank of Martin Luther's epochal protest was his desire to widen access to scripture: the priesthood of all believers, as he put it, was surely entitled to encounter God's word in a language with which they were familiar. While hiding out at the Wartburg castle during the early 1520s, Luther found time to compose a German translation of the Old Testament and by 1534, he had completed the whole Bible. These efforts proved to be inspirational to other followers of the reformed faith, but the risks were not inconsiderable. The Antwerp printer Jacob van Liesveldt provided a Dutch version of the Bible and was executed for his troubles. And then there was poor old William Tyndale.

Tyndale was one of the first Englishmen to embrace the tenets of what would come to be known as Protestantism. A reliable translation of the Bible into English struck him as the most obvious idea in the world. Tyndale, in his dutiful way, approached the bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, hoping to seek episcopal approval. Tunstall was, in some regards, was a forward-thinking humanist, but Tyndale's proposal was deemed to be beyond the pale. Having met resistance, Tyndale headed to the Continent (he may or may not have visited Luther's Wittenberg) and, by 1526, had crafted a translation of the New Testament. The response of the English authorities was staggeringly swift and efficient - when copies began to arrive in England, they were seized and burned, while agents were sent overseas to scoop up the others. Bishop Tunstall was having none of what he described as a "pestiferous and most pernicious poison". As a result, only three copies of Tyndale's original edition still exist today.

Tyndale produced revised versions during the 1530s and made good progress with his translations of the Old Testament. At first, his efforts were denounced. For Thomas More, Tyndale was "a hell-hound in the kennel of the devil". Henry VIII attacked the "many corruptions of that holy text... for the advancement and setting forth of his abominable heresies" and accused Tyndale of "discharging a filthy foam of blasphemy out of his brutish, beastly mouth". The issue, it is crucial to stress, was not the process of translation per se, but the use to which Tyndale was putting it. His translations deliberately struck at fundamental Catholic ideas. Tyndale used the word 'elder' rather than 'priest', undermining the notion of an elite clerical caste. He also opted for 'congregation' rather than 'church', and changed 'do penance' to 'repent', which seemed to challenge the concept of penance as a sacrament.

Tyndale was apprehended in 1535 and, after 16 months of imprisonment and interrogation, was strangled and then burned outside Brussels. Killing him before his body entered the flames was regarded as a charitable measure, and a recognition of his status as a scholar. Despite such tribulations, Tyndale's posthumous legacy was profound. The whirligig of the English Reformation soon brought him back into favour. His translations, along with additions by Myles Coverdale, appeared in 1537 (the



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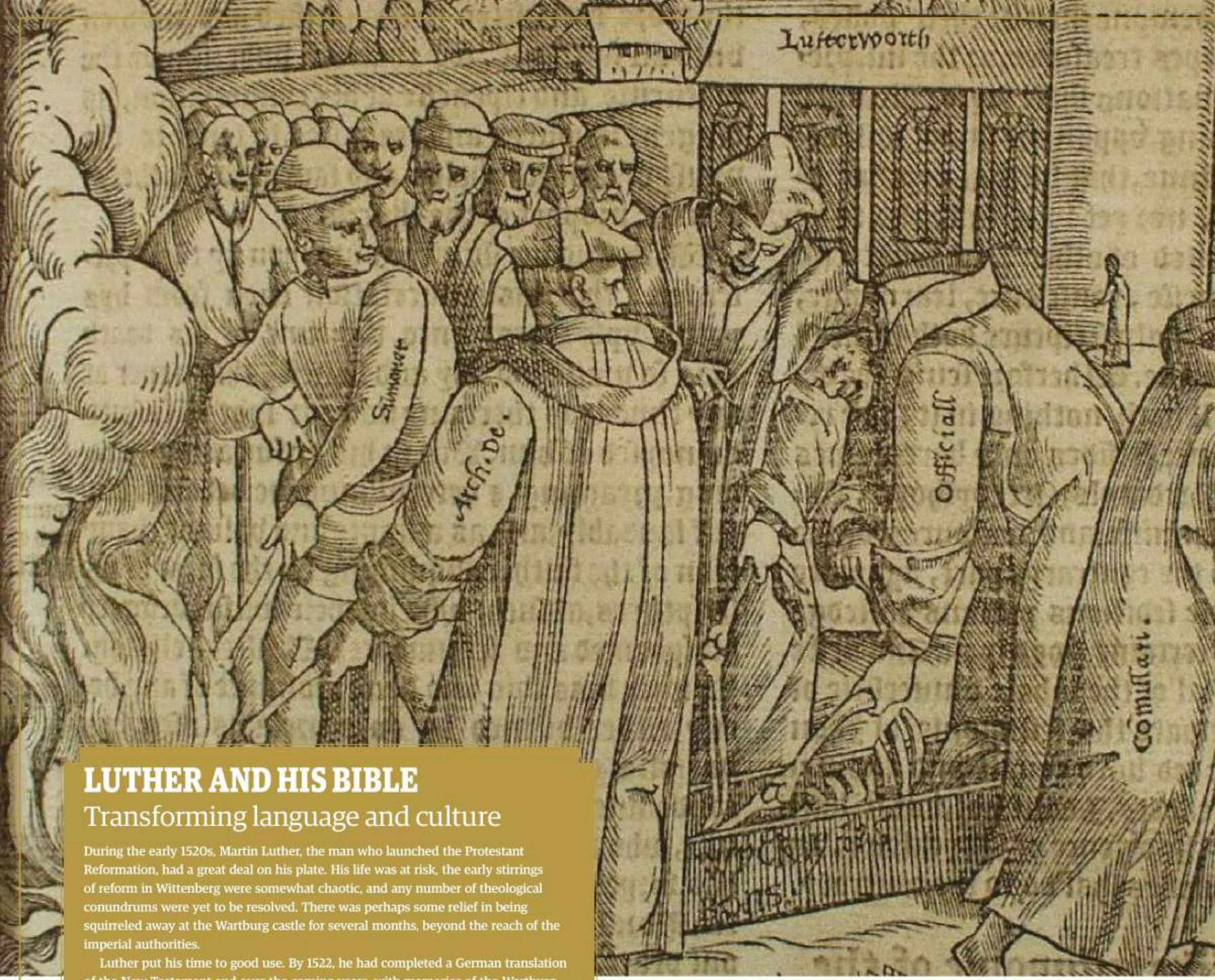
En lengua Eſpañola traduzida palabꝛa
poꝛ palabꝛa dela verdad Hebꝛayca
poꝛ muy excelentes letrados vi-
ſta y examinada poꝛ el officio
dela Inquiſicion.

Con pꝛiuillegio del ylluſtriſſimo Señoꝛ
Duque de Ferrara.

The Ferrara Bible: a 16th-century Spanish translation of Hebrew scripture

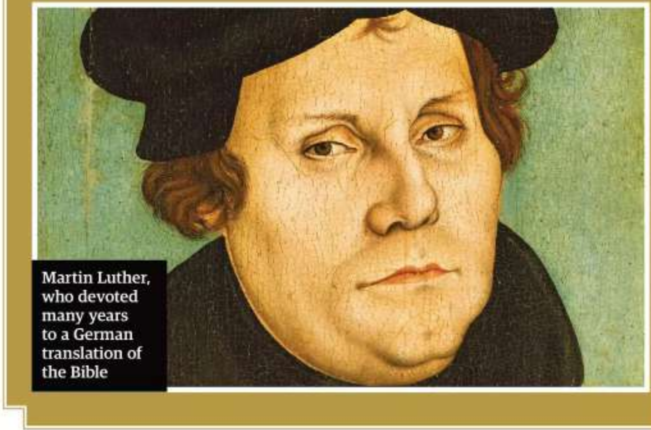


LUTHER AND HIS BIBLE

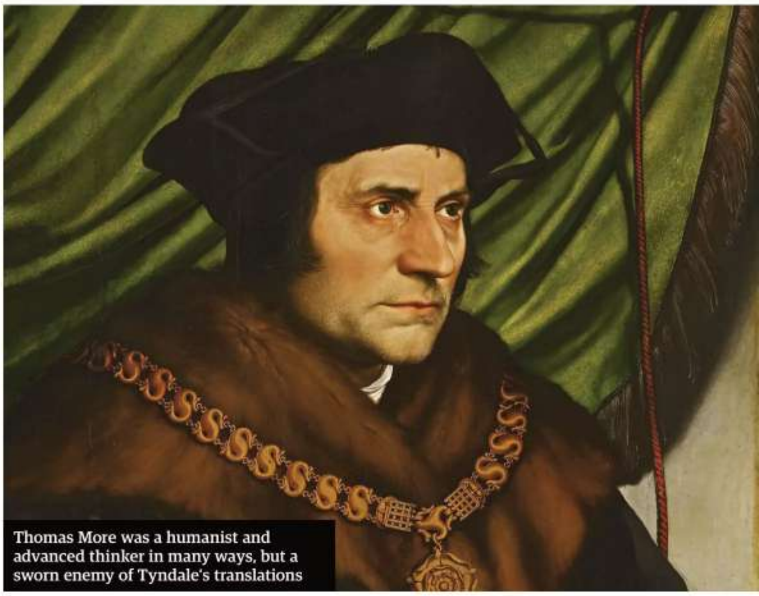
Transforming language and culture

During the early 1520s, Martin Luther, the man who launched the Protestant Reformation, had a great deal on his plate. His life was at risk, the early stirrings of reform in Wittenberg were somewhat chaotic, and any number of theological conundrums were yet to be resolved. There was perhaps some relief in being squirreled away at the Wartburg castle for several months, beyond the reach of the imperial authorities.

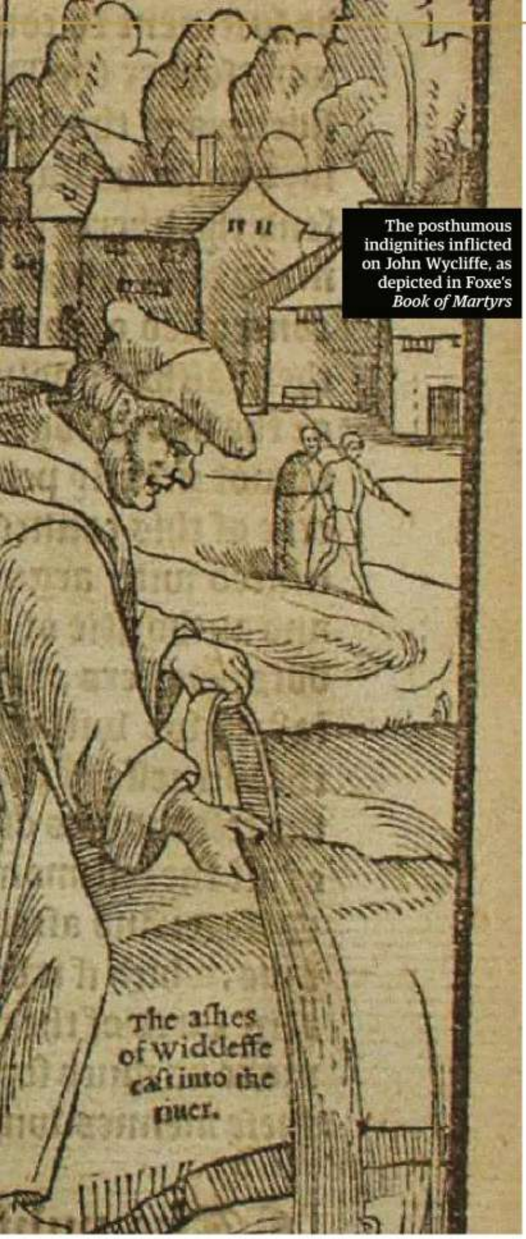
Luther put his time to good use. By 1522, he had completed a German translation of the New Testament and over the coming years, with memories of the Wartburg behind him, he worked on the Old Testament. A complete German translation of the Bible appeared in 1534 and it is notable for its embrace of the idioms of everyday German, as spoken by ordinary people in the streets and pews. As with so many of Luther's enterprises, the recent print revolution played a crucial part in his success. By 1574, more than 100,000 copies of his German Bible had been sold, and the text would have a profound impact on the development of the German language. Even Goethe - not an easy man to please - was a fan.



Martin Luther, who devoted many years to a German translation of the Bible



Thomas More was a humanist and advanced thinker in many ways, but a sworn enemy of Tyndale's translations



The posthumous indignities inflicted on John Wycliffe, as depicted in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*

so-called Matthew Bible) and they received official sanction and were enshrined in the Great Bible of 1539: it was ordered, at least for a while, that a copy should be placed in every parish church. The revised Bishops' Bible, also Tyndale in all but name, followed in 1568, and perhaps the most famous English biblical translation of them all, the King James Version, was hugely reliant on Tyndale's work. It is estimated that over 80 per cent of it derives directly from Tyndale. The wider impact on the English language is equally remarkable. Whenever you say "powers that be", "fat of the land" or "fight the good fight", you are quoting William Tyndale.

BEYOND THE REFORMATION

Tyndale had harsh words to say about the clerical status quo. Priests, he announced, wanted "to drive you from the knowledge of scripture", to ensure that "you shall not have the text thereof in the mother tongue, and to keep the world still in darkness, to the intent they might sit in the consciences of people... to satisfy their filthy lusts, their proud ambition, and insatiable covetousness". A rather sweeping statement, to be sure, but vernacular translation certainly became one of the hallmarks of the Protestant cause. The Geneva Bible of 1560, produced by English exiles, would have a profound impact on the reformed faith and almost every European country touched by Protestantism sooner or later got around to producing its local version of holy scripture.

The Catholic Church initially looked askance at such developments and made a point of reaffirming the authority of the Latin Vulgate at the Council of Trent, but it was not blind to the power that vernacular translations could wield. Caution was always in evidence. As one contemporary put it, there was surely a grave risk in placing the Bible "into the hands of every husbandman, artificer, apprentice", of "every tinker, taverner, rhymer, minstrel" and to make scriptural verses the stuff of "table talk, for ale benches, for boats and barges, and for every profane person and company".

For all that, the Catholic Church gradually embraced the idea of the vernacular Bible. In the Catholic heartlands, this task seemed less urgent: Spanish translations, for instance, tended to be produced outside the Iberian peninsula, where local authorities sustained their deep-seated suspicions. In places where Catholicism was under threat, however, vernacular translations began to emerge as a useful tool in sustaining the morale of buffeted Catholic communities. A notable example is the English translation of the Old Testament by exiled Catholics (published at Douai in 1609) and New Testament (at Rheims in 1582).

In any event, the Reformation era witnessed the birth of a translating frenzy that flourished over the subsequent four centuries and continues to this day. Qualms about the dangers of translating never entirely disappeared. In 1659, for example, one John Owen was still insisting that only the Hebrew originals could truly be trusted. Catholics and Quakers, he grumbled, were coming up with their versions of scripture, but this was "the craft of Satan". They were "adding, detracting and corrupting", and mixing the genuine outpourings of the Holy Spirit "with things of a human rise and spring". What right did they have to base their articles of faith on their translations, and to "place themselves in the throne of God"? "Had this leprosy kept itself within that house which is thoroughly infected, it had been of less importance", but, alas, it had spread to the Protestant faith as well. In and of itself, translation was not sinful, but so many of those who undertook the labour called the authority and authenticity of the Hebrew texts into question: daring to suggest that it was corrupt.

Others were more sanguine and biblical translation emerged as one of the crucial aspects of missionary activity around the globe. By 1663 John Eliot had produced the Bible in Algonquin; by the mid-18th century the Norwegian missionaries Hans and Paul Egede had brought the whole New Testament to Greenland; Japan was treated to a complete New Testament in 1880 and an Old Testament in 1887 - the same year in which a Korean New Testament hit the shelves. Not that we should imagine that controversy over translations had come to an end in places where Bibles had long been a fixture in the lives of the faithful. A revision of the King James Version was quite the hit, at least at first, in 1885 - 300,000 copies were sold in New York on the day of publication - but many found the text far too literal.

Contrariwise, those of more conservative theological tastes were outraged by the arrival of the Revised Standard Version, published in stages between 1946 and 1957. One Baptist church in Babylon, New York, took the time to place a censorious notice in a local paper: "Do not buy the RSV Bible, because it destroys the Virgin birth." The translators had altered a verse in Isaiah so that "virgin" was replaced by "young woman." Passions ran deep and alternative translations, notably the 1971 New American Standard Version, came along and were embraced by those of more evangelical Protestant sympathies. In the USA, to this day, the Bible you read is taken as a reliable marker of where you reside on the theological spectrum.

AN UNENVIABLE TASK

In the end, biblical translation has always been about conveying a religious message, but we should not forget the nuts and bolts of the work involved. Constant themes and conundrums have always made the translator's work difficult. Should you opt for word-for-word translation, or aim to capture the essence of a phrase - seeking, as the experts put it, "dynamic equivalence" that will speak more directly to your readership? The lack of undisputed original texts does not help the cause and throughout the history of biblical translation scribes and publishers have made errors. It is hard not to feel a little sorry for the distributor of the so-called Wicked Bible of 1631, whose list of commandments advised the faithful that "thou shalt commit adultery": the typesetter had forgotten to include the decidedly crucial "not" in the phrase.

It can safely be said that translating the Bible remains a subject of fascination. For TS Eliot, looking on from the sidelines, the enterprise was largely a matter of literary interest. For many Christians and Jews, it reaches to the heart of their faith. It is cheering, though, that we are still able to watch brilliant men and women attempting the impossible and few can compare to Robert Alter, whose translations will doubtless be remembered as some of the crowning literary achievements of the 21st century. You will know the phrase from Psalm 23, as rendered in the King James Version: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." All very poetical but, as Alter points out, it uses 20 syllables while the original Hebrew manages it in just 11. Alter opts for what he calls "rhythmic compactness" and fidelity to the pulse of what was written all those centuries ago. The result is: "Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow, I fear no harm." That's still 14 syllables, but it has a spare elegance that is hard to resist. Biblical translation, it would seem, is still alive and well.

ENDURING ELEGANCE: THE KING JAMES BIBLE

The King James Bible, conceived as both a religious and political tool, survives as an iconic translation of the Scriptures into the English language

Words by Mike Haskew

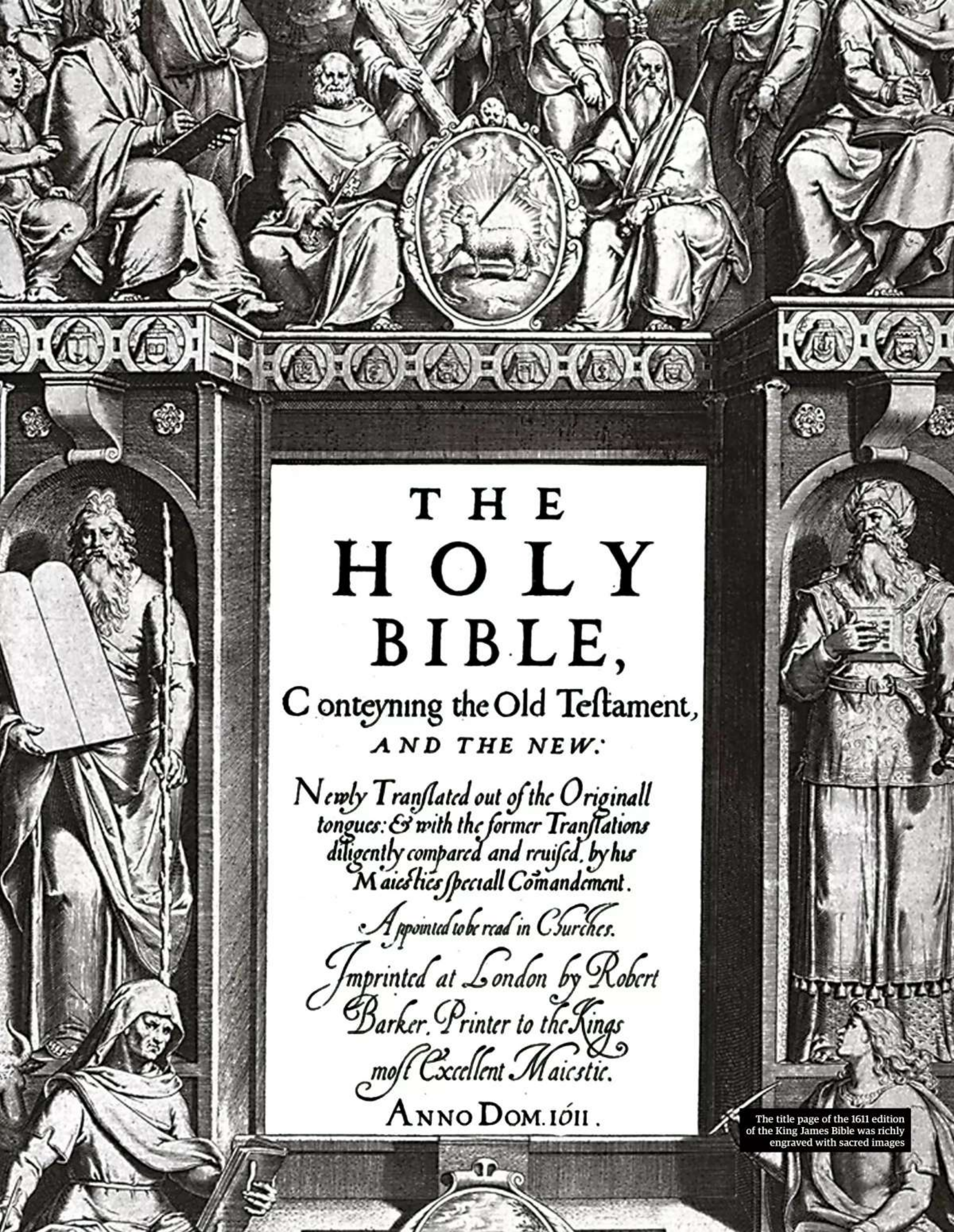
"I defy the pope and all his laws, and if God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!" railed William Tyndale in a stinging retort to a clergyman's warning that many of his opinions were contrary to the position of the church.

After fleeing England in 1524, Tyndale completed the first translation of the New Testament into English directly from Hebrew and Greek texts rather than Latin. As it was distributed, church leaders suppressed the translation since it threatened their control of access to the Scriptures and might undermine their authority if the common Englishman could read the Bible for himself. Tyndale was strangled and his lifeless body burned at the stake in Vilvoorde, Belgium, in 1536. His last words were reportedly, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes!"

For decades, simple possession of Tyndale's historic work might have meant a death sentence in England, but by the early 17th century the situation had changed. The Bishops' Bible, an English translation commissioned under the authority of the Church of England in 1568, was the official text in use by its bishops and clergy at that time. The Geneva Bible, produced in complete form in 1560, was the primary text of European Protestantism and the most popular contemporary translation in England. The Great Bible, the first authorised English translation of the Bible, dating to the 1530s, was also in circulation.

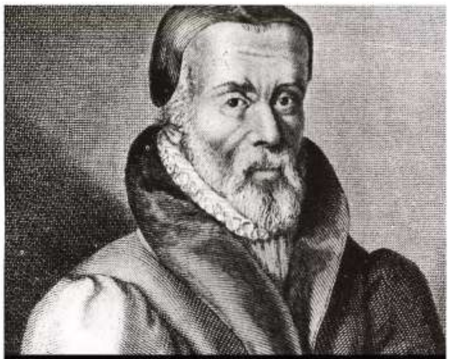
Tyndale's translation is significant for another reason. Its accuracy since it was translated from original Greek and Hebrew, along with its eloquence and sheer linguistic beauty, gained it lasting popularity. The work that cost Tyndale his life also became the foundation for much of the King James Bible. Scholars estimate that as much as 90 per cent of the King James Version's New Testament is based on Tyndale's translation.

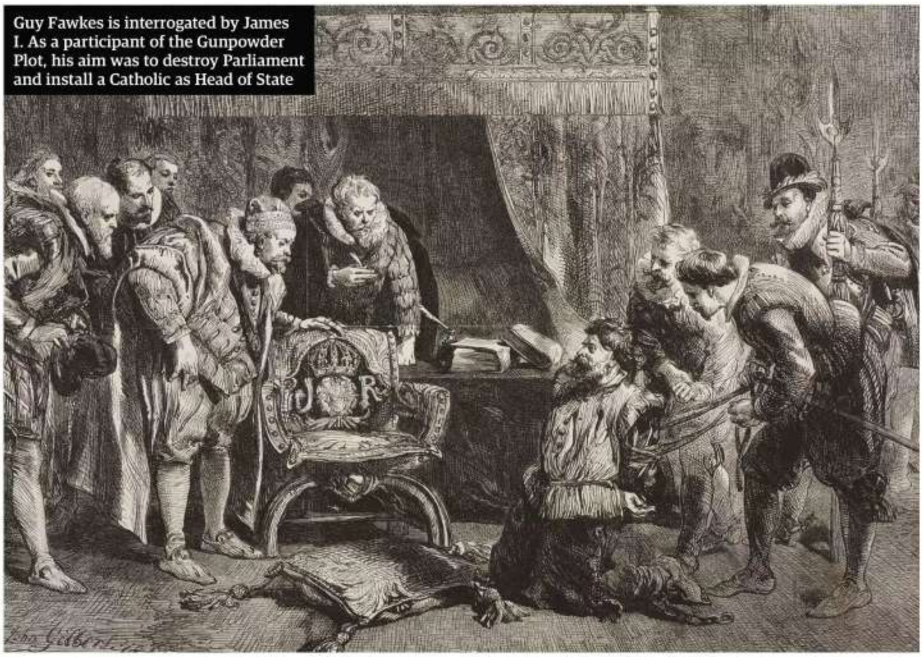
Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, King James VI of Scotland also became King James I of England. The church was already in the throes of the Protestant Reformation. The Church of England, administered by an elite cadre of bishops and clergy, wielded tremendous power. The Puritans sought to fully implement principles of the Reformation and to distance the already separate church from the influence of the pope in Rome. The Catholics were loyal to the Holy See and wished for a complete return to the fold of the original church. The Presbyterians were particularly interested in eliminating the hierarchy of bishops and advocated its replacement with lay officials such as elders or presbyters.



THE
HOLY
BIBLE,
Conteyning the Old Teſtament,
AND THE NEW:
Newly Tranſlated out of the Originall
tongues: & with the former Tranſlations
diligently compared and reuiſed, by his
Maieſties ſpeciall Cõmandement.
Appointed to be read in Churches.
Imprinted at London by Robert
Barker, Printer to the Kings
moſt Excellent Maieſtie.
ANNO DOM. 1611.

The title page of the 1611 edition of the King James Bible was richly engraved with sacred images


William Tyndale completed a landmark translation of the New Testament in 1625 and was later executed


Guy Fawkes is interrogated by James I. As a participant of the Gunpowder Plot, his aim was to destroy Parliament and install a Catholic as Head of State

Although many Presbyterians and Puritans believed that the Scottish King James would support their initiatives, they were mistaken. James was a firm believer in the Divine Right of Kings, the premise that kings inherited their right to rule directly from God. Any movement that might weaken the position of the bishops and the Church of England might eventually threaten his own security and had to be silenced. Still, the king realised that in order to maintain the peace he would be compelled to recognise the influence of the Puritans and Presbyterians. At the same time, those holding influential positions within the Church of England had a huge stake in retaining the status quo. In time, these sharp divisions within the Christian community contributed to the outbreak of the English Civil War.

However, in April 1603, as James journeyed from Edinburgh to London for his coronation, both peril and opportunity awaited. On the road southward, James and his entourage were met by a delegation of Puritans, who had wasted no time in marshalling their intellectual forces. They presented the new king with a document that has come to be known as the Millenary Petition. With more than 1,000 signatures of Puritan clergymen and leaders, the petition asked James for freedom from the rigid rights of the established church, its trappings, and its elitist hierarchy. The signatures represented roughly ten per cent of the English clergy, and the document could not be ignored.

In October 1603, James issued a royal proclamation calling for a conference at Hampton Court Palace on the outskirts of London "for the hearing, and for the determining, things pretended to be amiss with the church."

The king's language is telling. Apparently, he did not anticipate changes that would favour the Puritans or Presbyterians to emerge from the conference. Perhaps the great meeting was intended only as an accommodation, to present an allusion of concern for the petitioners. Nevertheless, an agreement of monumental importance that was not even originally a topic for discussion forcefully emerged.

Although there was much that divided them, King James and John Rainolds, the Puritan president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, did find common ground when the latter proposed to undertake a new translation of the Bible. James despised the Geneva Bible, which was replete with marginal notes and annotations that were blatant indictments of the privileged hierarchy of the Church of England. In fact, he once stated that it contained annotations that were "very partial, untrue, seditious, and savouring too much of dangerous and seditious conceits." In fairness, the Catholics were riled by the marginal notes as well, some of which referred to the pope as the Antichrist.

"AS JAMES JOURNEYED FROM EDINBURGH TO LONDON FOR HIS CORONATION, PERIL AWAITED"

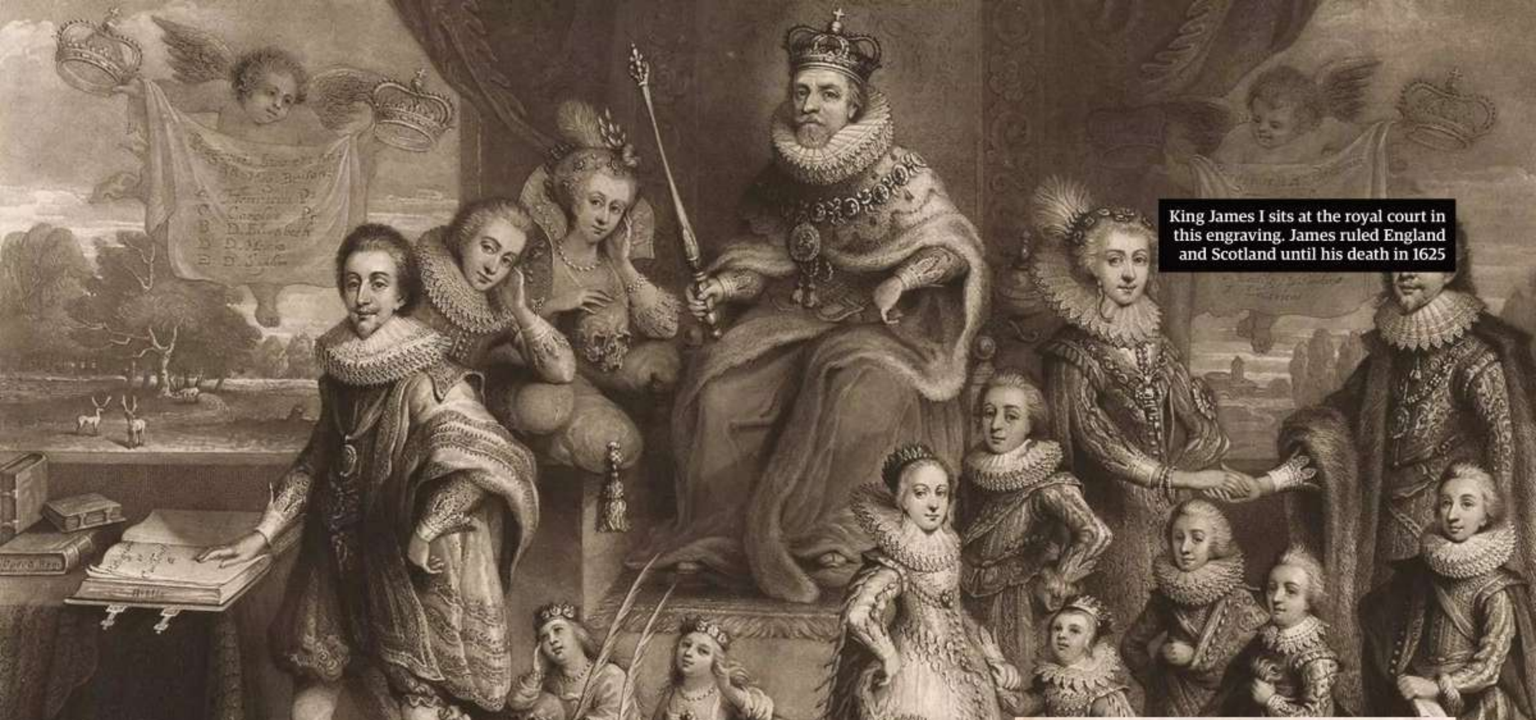
Interestingly, the Puritans had been barred from the first day of the conference. When they were allowed to enter on the second day, Rainolds spoke for the Puritan delegation. The immediate uproar nearly caused the conference to implode. Rainolds addressed the king, "Why shouldn't the bishops govern jointly with a presbyterie of their brethren, the pastors and ministers of the church?"

His poor choice of the word 'presbyterie' brought the wrath of the king down swiftly. "If you aim at a Scots Presbyterie, it agreeth as well with monarchy as God and the Devil! Then Jack, and Tom, and Will, and Dick shall meet and censure me and my council... No bishop, no King! If this be all your party hath to say, I will make them conform themselves, or else I will harrie them out of the land, or else do worse!"

Rainolds managed to wriggle out of immediate hot water with the king thanks to his suggestion for a new translation of the Bible into English. On 17 January 1604, a resolution was approved "... that the translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes." James I would have his politically palatable Bible free of any extraneous Puritan-inspired commentary.

Rainolds had made his proposal in the vain hope that James would turn at least somewhat away from the Bishops' Bible, but the king was clear that the new translation was to be based on this preferred text. Since Rainolds had made the suggestion, he was given charge of the project. For the next seven years, as many as 50 scholars laboured in the spectacular undertaking. Numerous biblical translations were consulted, among them the Tyndale New Testament, the Geneva Bible, the Great Bible, the Bishops' Bible, the Coverdale Bible, the Roman Catholic Rheims New Testament, as well as several others.

Rainolds returned to Oxford and began work with other churchmen on a translation involving the prophets. Five other committees worked on remaining sections of the new Bible, painstakingly pondering virtually every word to determine the optimal translation into English. The preliminary texts were then forwarded to colleagues for review and discussion. Sadly, Rainolds did not live to see the completion of the work he had undertaken. He died of tuberculosis in 1607. Still, he gained a

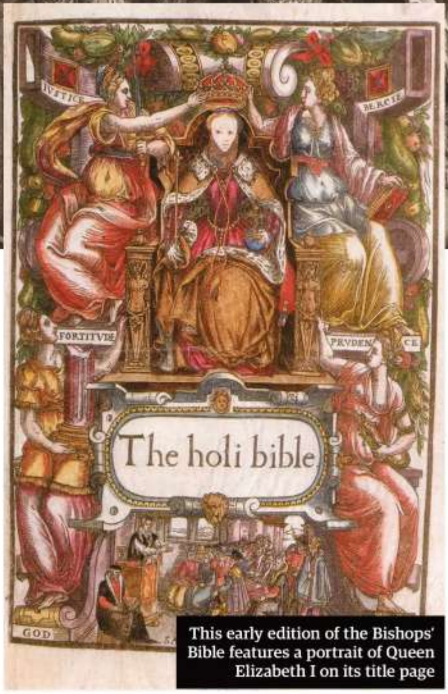

King James I sits at the royal court in this engraving. James ruled England and Scotland until his death in 1625

measure of his original intent as, along with the Tyndale New Testament, much of the King James Bible is based on the Geneva Bible despite the warning of James I.

From 1605 to 1606, research was conducted. Then, from 1607 to 1609 the various committees assembled their completed portions. Printing began in 1610, and the following year the first of the large pulpit editions, known as the 1611 King James Bible, were introduced. Decades passed before the new translation became as popular as the Geneva Bible and even supplanted it among the people.

Although the King James Bible was commissioned as a bulwark against the Puritan/Protestant Geneva Bible, many modern Protestant churches proclaim the King James as the only valid English translation of the Scriptures. The Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church were zealous in their persecution of Protestants during the 16th century, and when Protestants began to flee to the New World to find religious freedom they brought the Geneva Bible - not the King James - with them.

Still, the King James translation is a work of tremendous scholarship and profound literary quality. It remains the most printed book in history, and while other versions of the Bible have been produced since, it can rightly be said that the King James remained the preferred text for at least 250 years, perhaps only really rivalled by the growing acceptance of the New International Version that emerged in the 20th century.



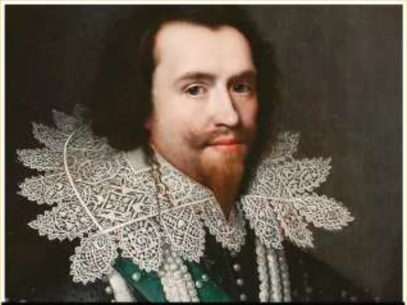
This early edition of the Bishops' Bible features a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I on its title page

BOTH PIOUS AND PERVERSE?

Was the king as righteous as he seemed?

While King James I is remembered as a pious man, he is also known to have carried on homosexual relationships. The king must have found a rationalisation in order to have come to terms with his sexual orientation and awareness that it has been considered by many to be incompatible with Christian teaching. As early as the age of 13, James exhibited open affection for Esmé Stewart, 1st Duke of Lennox. King James also had a relationship with Robert Carr, 1st Earl of Somerset, who blackmailed him with the threat of revealing that they had been homosexual lovers.

Perhaps James' most ardent affair was carried on with George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham. The king compared his love for Buckingham with Jesus' love of the disciple John. "I, James, am neither a god nor an angel, but a man like any other," the king wrote. "Therefore I act like a man and confess to loving those dear to me more than other men. You may be sure that I love the Earl of Buckingham more than anyone else... I wish to speak in my own behalf and not to have it thought to be a defect, for Jesus Christ did the same, and therefore I cannot be blamed. Christ had John, and I have George."


George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham, was at the side of King James I when the monarch died

IMPACT

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The compelling themes and stories of the Bible have inspired artists in every genre: from page to canvas, and from the concert hall to the silver screen

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The ancient Judaic and Christian writings that became the Bible were unique in bringing together religion and ethics

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Problems arose when different interpretations claimed to be authoritative

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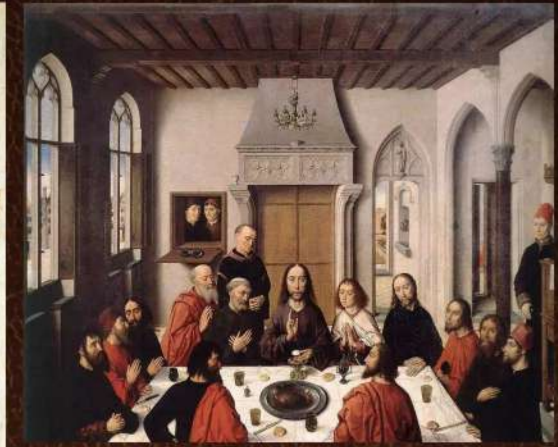
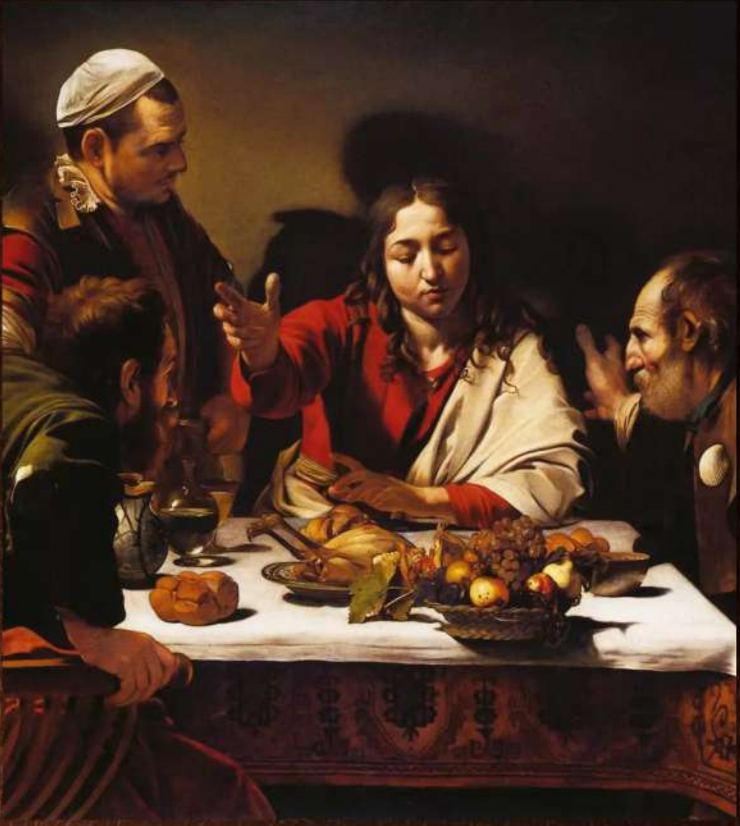
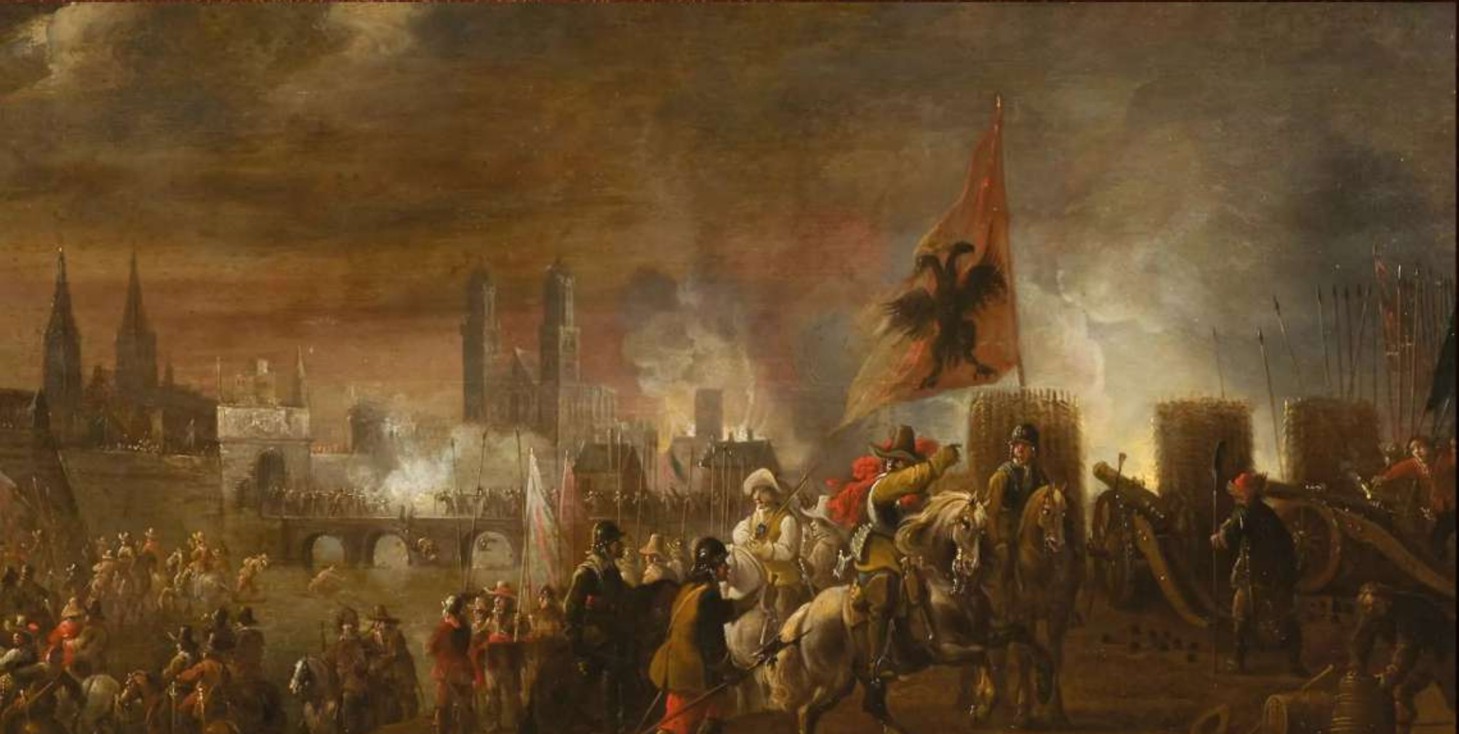


NO MORE BIRMINGHAMS





A WELLSPRING OF CREATIVITY

The compelling themes and stories of the Bible have inspired artists in every genre: from page to canvas, and from the concert hall to the silver screen

Words by Jon Wright

The bookends of Jesus' life are captured with matchless eloquence and poignancy by two of the abiding images of the Christian artistic tradition. In the Pietà, we see Mary cradling her sacrificed son in her lap following the crucifixion. This powerful scene has been portrayed by countless artists, with its popularity reaching a zenith between the 14th and 17th centuries. Many of the finest medieval versions are wooden carvings in which Mary's grief and Jesus's suffering demand the viewers' gaze. They embody what the 12th-century abbot and theologian Bernard of Clairvaux described as Mary's "spiritual martyrdom" through the terrible loss of her child. For the Christian, of course, there was triumph and redemption in the crucifixion, too, and this is a message hammered home in perhaps the most famous Pietà of them all: Michelangelo's imposing Carrara marble sculpture in St Peter's Basilica, completed in 1499. Here, Mary is suddenly youthful again, looking almost serene, and the horrors inflicted on Jesus' body, far less graphically portrayed, do not provoke feelings of revulsion but, rather, of gratitude.

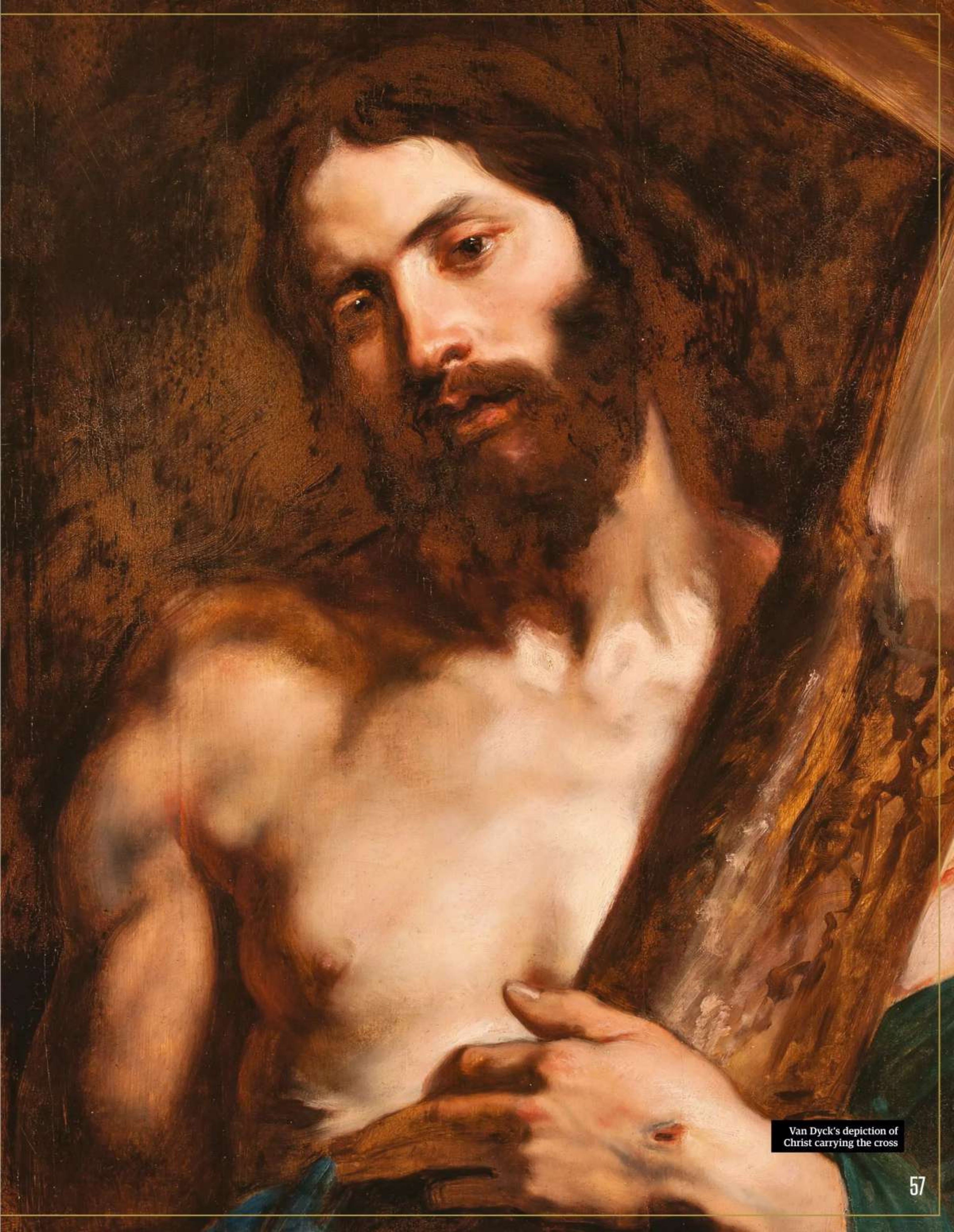
Another staple image takes the viewer back to the beginning of Christ's life. Few periods in Christian history have been able to resist depictions of Mary holding her infant son. The earliest images date from the era of the Roman catacombs and the subject sustained its popularity throughout the medieval and early-modern centuries, attracting the attention of painters as gifted as Leonardo da Vinci, Bellini and Rubens. The laurels probably go to Raphael, whose various Madonna and Child paintings are permeated by a sense of intimacy and tenderness. One can almost imagine Mary bouncing the infant Jesus on her knee. But at the same time, all such images carry a sense of menace. There's an inevitable and disturbing symmetry between the gentle picture of Mary with a baby Jesus on her lap and the anguish that is to come: the moment when the mother will one day hold her child in a very different way. Looking at, say, Raphael's *Madonna of the Pinks* then turning to a Pietà by El Greco or Rogier van der Weyden can be a haunting experience.

Jesus, as we might expect, has always been a fixture in art inspired by the Bible and every aspect of his life - from his ministry to the Passion, from the miracles to the parables - has been painted time and time again. Similarly, you would find it difficult to locate a prophet, apostle or noteworthy biblical event that has not inspired some artist or other (and most likely dozens of them) to take up their pencil, pastels or paintbrush. The range of topics and opportunities is, after all, spectacular. *The Tower of Babel* allowed Pieter Bruegel the Elder to display his skill in producing works of extraordinary detail and intricacy. Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden prompted Masaccio to create one of the most devastating portrayals of human shame and sadness in the whole of western art.

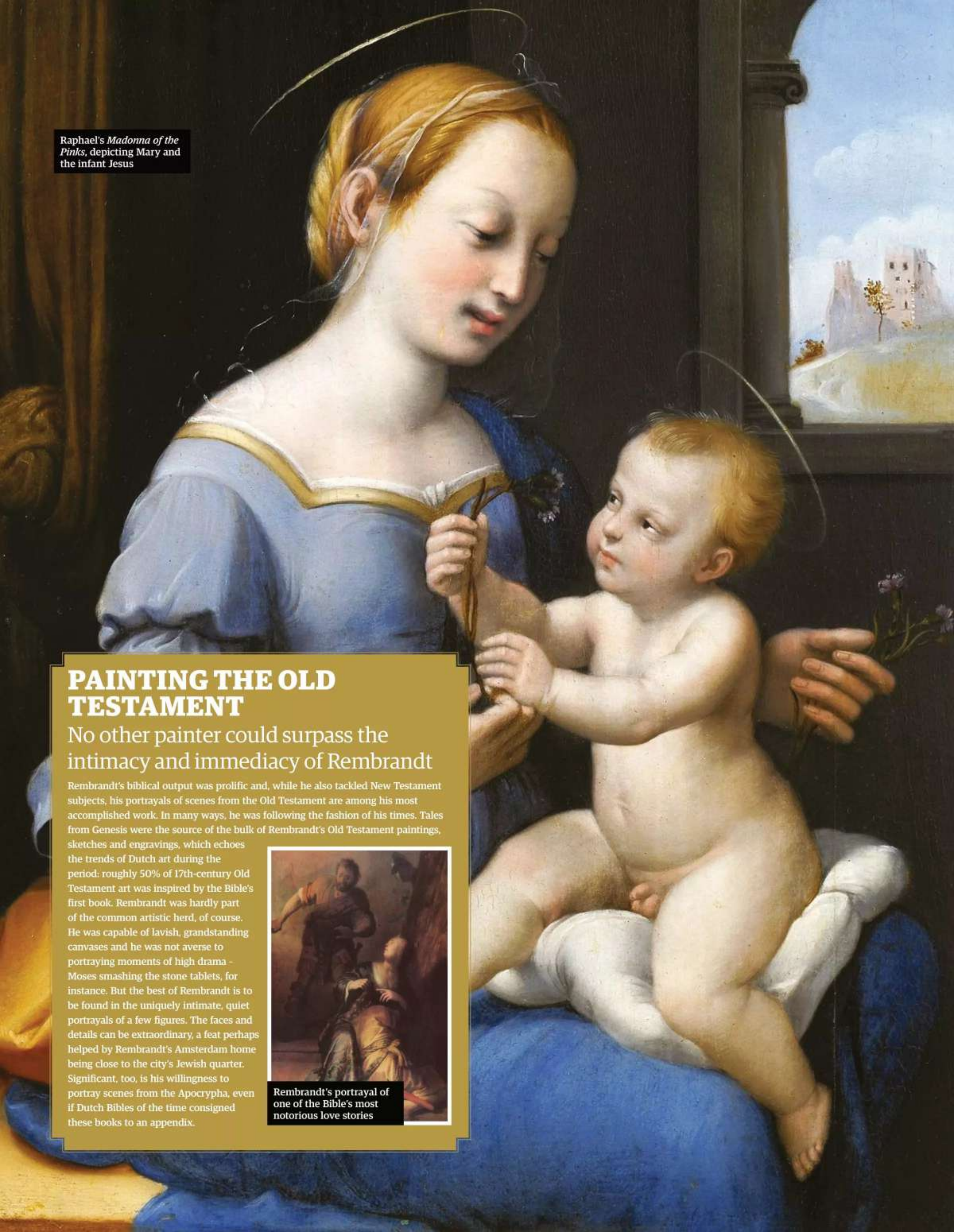
THE PERILS OF PORTRAYAL?

Not that the Christian encounter with visual media has always been untroubled. The early Church was slow to embrace the devotional opportunities presented by religious imagery. This reluctance derived, in part, from the new faith's Jewish inheritance. Judaism had always been on the lookout for idolatry: those moments when pictures moved beyond their role as tools in worship and became objects of veneration in their own right.

This concern was particularly keen in the eastern Christian churches and many Church leaders frowned upon practices such as the kissing of icons: some even suggested that flakes of paintings were being added to the mix during the making of sacramental bread. The counter-argument was that visual portrayals of Christ allowed his human aspect to be brought to the fore: an important task if you were a firm believer in the Trinity. Matters came



Van Dyck's depiction of
Christ carrying the cross



Raphael's *Madonna of the Pinks*, depicting Mary and the infant Jesus

PAINTING THE OLD TESTAMENT

No other painter could surpass the intimacy and immediacy of Rembrandt

Rembrandt's biblical output was prolific and, while he also tackled New Testament subjects, his portrayals of scenes from the Old Testament are among his most accomplished work. In many ways, he was following the fashion of his times. Tales from Genesis were the source of the bulk of Rembrandt's Old Testament paintings, sketches and engravings, which echoes the trends of Dutch art during the period: roughly 50% of 17th-century Old Testament art was inspired by the Bible's first book. Rembrandt was hardly part of the common artistic herd, of course. He was capable of lavish, grandstanding canvases and he was not averse to portraying moments of high drama - Moses smashing the stone tablets, for instance. But the best of Rembrandt is to be found in the uniquely intimate, quiet portrayals of a few figures. The faces and details can be extraordinary, a feat perhaps helped by Rembrandt's Amsterdam home being close to the city's Jewish quarter. Significant, too, is his willingness to portray scenes from the Apocrypha, even if Dutch Bibles of the time consigned these books to an appendix.

Rembrandt's portrayal of one of the Bible's most notorious love stories to a head in the 8th century when the Byzantine emperor Leo III ordered a wide-scale destruction of religious images. Riots ensued and many of the protestors were whipped, exiled or mutilated. Art was burned and, as one contemporary lamented, churches were "scraped down and smeared with ashes". What right, the iconoclasts asked, did a painter have to "fashion with his impure hands things that are believed in the heart?"

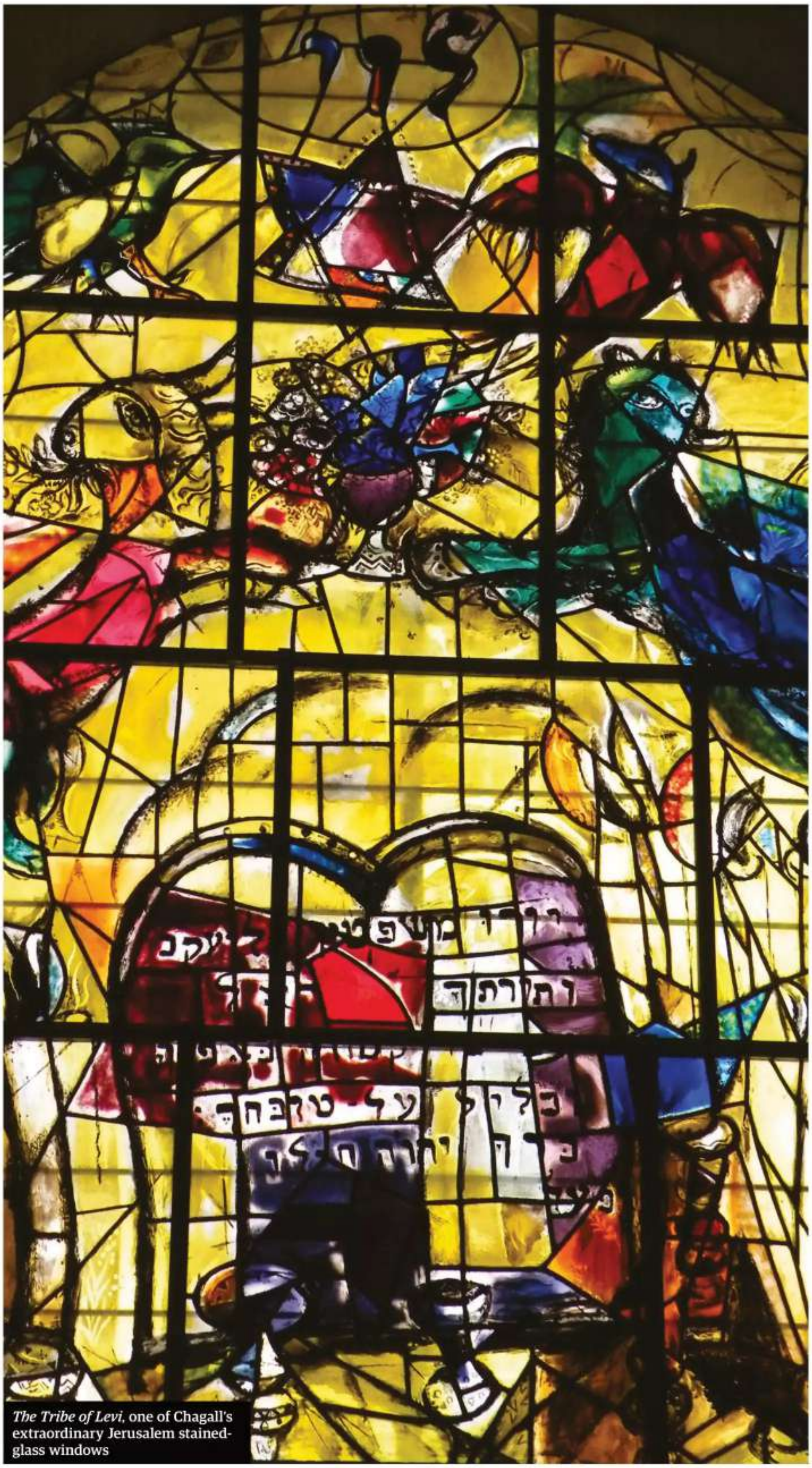
These events provoked uproar in the western Church and many angry letters were passed between popes and emperors. Images, as Pope Gregory II explained, were of great value because they could instruct the illiterate. "By means of these pictures the hearts and minds of men are directed to God," not to mention the hearts of women, children, and potential pagan converts. Byzantine politics proved to be, well, Byzantine. The empress Irene approved the use of images in 787. The emperor Theophilus reversed her decision early in the next century, ordering artists to destroy or spit (quite literally) upon their works and inflicting harsh punishments on those who would not comply. An artist named Lazarus was subjected to "such severe tortures that his flesh melted away" and when he began work again, following his recovery, red hot irons were pressed into his hands. Happily, by the mid-9th century, the turmoil came to an end and religious art was once again sanctioned in the eastern Churches.

THE BROADEST OF CANVASES

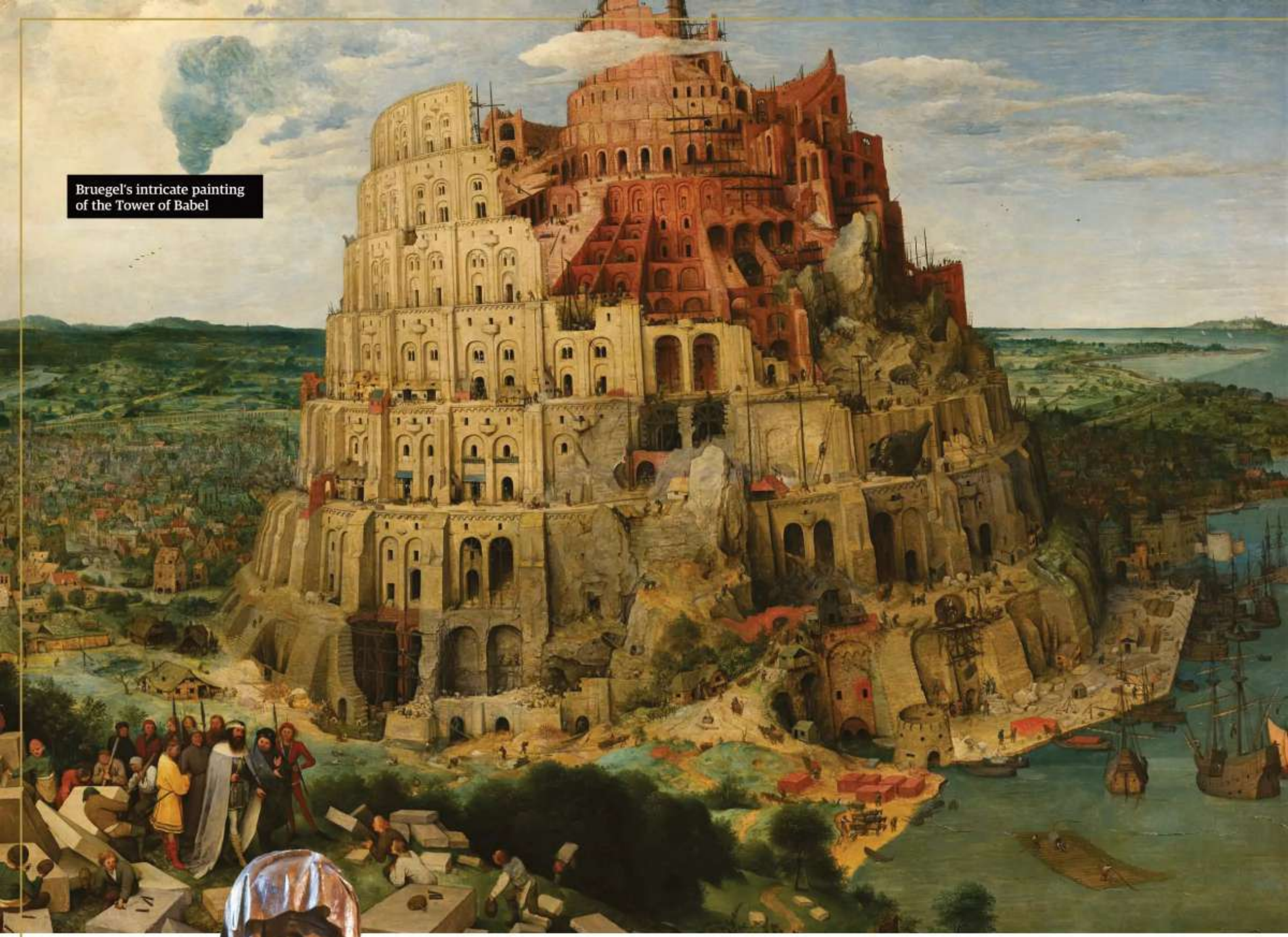
Such debates would never entirely vanish, and the issue of the rectitude of religious imagery would flare up with gusto once again during the 16th-century Reformation. Nonetheless, the Christian grasp of art's potential has been a constant and impressive aspect of the Church's history. The list of phenomenal masters of their craft is long: from the icon-makers of the east, to the illustrators of medieval manuscripts, to the likes of Rubens and Titian and their sumptuous canvases. But there is more to see than just paintings that emerged from a sense of devotion, or that were focused on lifelike, literal depictions of biblical events.

The Bible's ability to inspire could sometimes touch the most unlikely artistic imaginations. Fast-forwarding to the modern era, an extreme example would be Francis Bacon and his various crucifixion paintings and studies (1944, 1962, 1965 and 1988). Bacon made it very clear that he was tackling the issue of how human beings treated each other, and there is at least as much influence from ancient myth as from any Christian source. The viewer sees the slaughterhouse more than Calvary. And yet the paintings' titles and the way they are arranged in the long-established Christian form of the triptych is telling, and the attentive viewer will also see homage being paid to more conventional depictions of the crucifixion from the Christian past.

Not that biblical paintings charged with religious meaning vanished in the modern era: they could even find themselves in the vanguard of artistic innovation. Salvador Dalí, despite his surrealist past, came to relish biblical subject matter after his



The Tribe of Levi, one of Chagall's extraordinary Jerusalem stained-glass windows


Bruegel's intricate painting of the Tower of Babel

return to the faith during the 1940s. His biblical illustrations in gouache, watercolour, ink and pastels are challenging but rewarding works, much like his famous *Madonna of Port Lligat*. Not everyone was pleased by Dalí's religious turn: some saw a betrayal of his earlier radicalism, while some found his approach to biblical material hard to understand. The *Sacrament of the Last Supper* carried a mystical charge for some viewers, but one commentator could not stomach Jesus being portrayed, as he put it (rather cruelly), as "a sentimental but very good athlete on an American baseball team."

A more generous reception was granted to Marc Chagall, an artist obsessed with the vistas opened up by Scripture. He took the trouble to visit Palestine in 1931 to soak up the local landscape and there, as he put it, "I found unexpectedly the Bible and a part of my very being." Religious painting was a mainstay of Chagall's career, with his 'Verve' lithographs, depicting biblical scenes, being one of the highlights. He may have had Jewish origins, but Chagall also found power in Christ's story: Jesus's suffering took on new, terrible meaning in an era that witnessed the horrors of Stalin's Russia and the Holocaust. The crowning achievements of Chagall's extraordinary fruitful career were, however, his works in stained glass, which can be found around the world, from Metz and Chichester cathedrals to the astonishing Jerusalem windows that depict the Twelve Tribes of Israel. "To read the Bible," Chagall explained, "is to perceive a certain light, and the window has to make this obvious through its simplicity and grace." It was a skill that Chagall most certainly mastered.

WORDS ABOUT THE WORD

Two streams can readily be discerned in the visual approach to the Bible: one leads to direct representations of biblical events, while the other is more about pursuing themes or using the stories as a starting point for broader artistic meditation. Much the same could be said of literature. C S Lewis, an author greatly inspired by the Bible, put it very well: "a source gives us things to write about; an influence prompts us to write in a certain way."

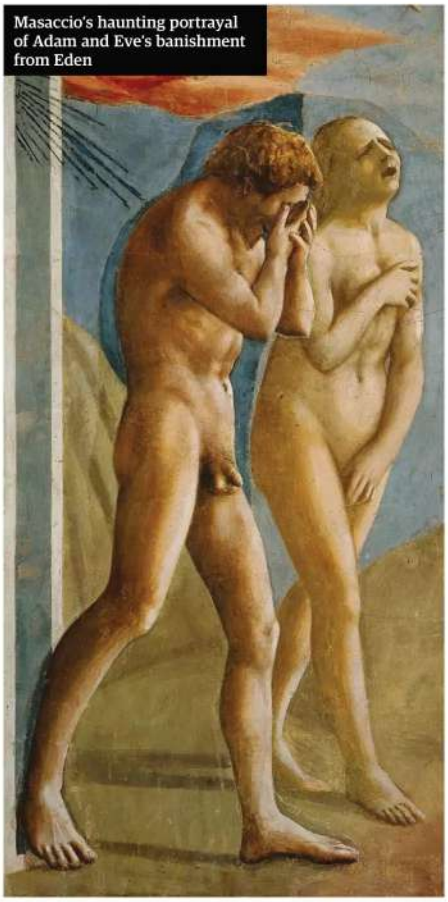
Countless masterpieces have attempted to re-tell biblical stories in new ways, or have used the Bible as a springboard for flights of the literary imagination: from medieval mystery plays, to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The encounter with biblical material has often defined the parameters of a literary career. It permeates the writing of John Donne, for example. We find allusions at every turn - in the essays and poems as well as the devotional

A wooden Pietà, depicting Mary and Christ, from 16th-century France

"SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS CONTAIN BIBLICAL REFERENCES HIS AUDIENCE WOULD HAVE READILY IDENTIFIED"

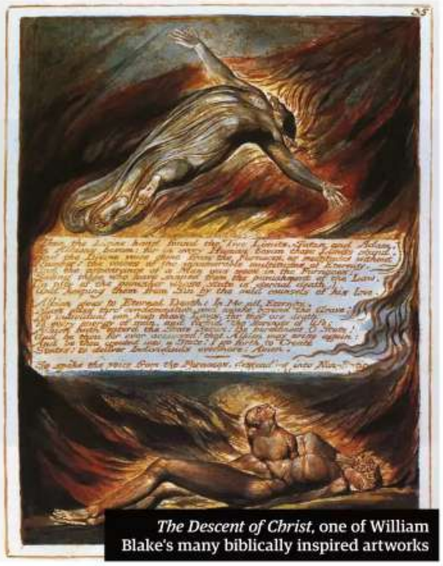
works. One satire on England's legal system manages to cram in references to Esther, Genesis, Isaiah, Micah, Numbers and Psalms. Donne took an unusually thorough approach to the Bible: consulting as many editions (whether ancient or in translation) as he could lay his hands on, and he felt at liberty to change a word here or a phrase there to meet his artistic needs. He was always adamant, though, that "there are not so eloquent books in the world as the Scriptures". They were "a holy delight".

Sometimes the parallels with biblical material or exploitation of biblical themes are very easy to spot. It would require a dull imagination not to see that Steinbeck's *East Of Eden* moves the tale of Cain and Abel to California's Salinas Valley. Melville's *Moby-Dick* would not be the same without the glaring, and deliberate, biblical hinterland. Sometimes, though, homage to the Bible operates at various levels. Shakespeare, for example, did not tell religious stories but the plays are crowded with biblical references and themes that his scripturally literate audiences would have readily identified. Perhaps modern scholarship sometimes goes a little too far in tracing these links - pointing towards parallels between Pilate and Lady Macbeth, or reading Antony and Cleopatra through the prism of the Book of Revelation - or perhaps such analyses reveal just how profound Shakespeare's appreciation and manipulation of the Bible could be.


Masaccio's haunting portrayal of Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden

And then there's Fyodor Dostoevsky: a case study in a lifelong, conflicted dialogue with Scripture. The great Russian author's relationship to Christianity was complex and remains a matter of scholarly debate. His faith was, however, real enough: he simply admitted that it was a struggle. As he put it, rather beautifully, "My hosanna has passed through a great crucible of doubt." The Bible meant everything to Dostoevsky. During his Siberian exile his prized possession was a leather-bound New Testament. A friend remarked that "the Gospel was the only thing that kept hope alive in his heart". It was always under his pillow during the dark days, and always on his desk when he was back at his literary work. The underlining and marginal notes on the copy reveal how often Dostoevsky consulted the text.

The novels contain many explicit references to the Bible, but Dostoevsky's use of biblical themes as a launching pad for his moral meditation is every bit as interesting: the nature of sin, the role of love in a troubled world, the place of compassion and forgiveness. There was great daring, too, in creating a character like Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*: a man of purity who is taken for a fool in an almost Christ-like way. One of the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* speaks of the Bible in terms that mirror


The Descent of Christ, one of William Blake's many biblically inspired artworks

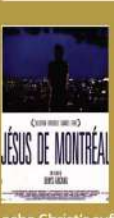
THE BIBLE GOES TO THE MOVIES

Aaaaaand ACTION! We select five of the most famous films inspired by the Bible

BEN HUR

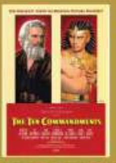
The epic 1959 blockbuster, subtitled 'A Tale of the Christ', required one of Hollywood's largest budgets, a lengthy shooting schedule, and more than 10,000 extras. The film secured itself 11 Academy Awards.

JESUS OF MONTREAL



An outstanding 1989 French-Canadian film about the production of a Passion play in a Montreal church. The tribulations of the central character, Daniel, echo Christ's sufferings and the film deals intelligently with issues about the historical Jesus.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS



Cecil B DeMille's 1956 remake of his 1923 silent movie is something of a visual treat thanks to its being filmed on location in the Middle East and remains the most famous cinematic account of Moses' life.

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

The Last Temptation of Christ

Martin Scorsese's 1988 film attracted a huge deal of controversy and protests from some Christian groups. The self-doubting, fearful Jesus, not immune from sexual urges, was not to everyone's taste, but the critics were mostly impressed.

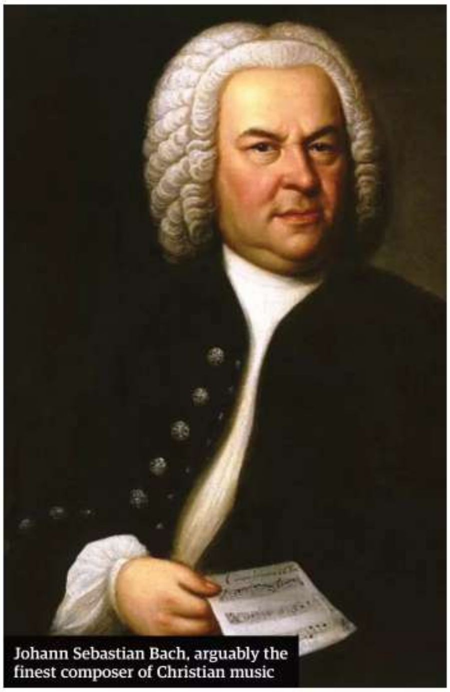
SALOME

HAYWORTH GRANGER
SALOME

With Rita Hayworth as the titular Jewish Princess Salome, this 1953 film has a cast of familiar characters - from Herod to John the Baptist - but is notable for its tendency to play fast and loose with some of the details of the biblical narrative.

at least part of Dostoevsky's approach to the text: "what a book the Bible is, what a miracle, what strength is given with it to man... everything is there, and a law for everything for all the ages".

A more puzzling, even subversive approach to the Bible has been another constant in literature's relationship with Scripture. William Blake provides a good example of this. Blake, as controversial a literary figure as the 19th-century produced, rarely had the Bible out of his hands. He insisted that "the Old Testament and the New Testament are the Great Code of Art" and biblical themes and allusions were a mainstay of his artistic output: both the written word and his striking artistic work.


Johann Sebastian Bach, arguably the finest composer of Christian music

He did, of course, take a decidedly idiosyncratic stance. The Bible, he wrote, was "more entertaining and instructive than any other book" but only because it was "addressed to the imagination." Blake had little time for organised religion and disliked the way in which the Bible was treated, primarily, as an ethical compass. Far better, he argued, to explore its visionary potential and see it as a spiritual resource than to use it as the basis for censorious moralising. Blake, the man who liked his angels and felt at ease with his convoluted mythologies, deployed the Bible to position the poet as a latter-day prophet. Literal readings of the text and debates about the historical Jesus were not for him. Whether he was a bold renegade or simply a madman remains a matter of debate, but the Bible has rarely been put to such innovative creative use.

SINGING (AND PLAYING) SCRIPTURE

Music has always played a crucial role in Christian worship - from Gregorian chant to the polyphony of Thomas Tallis and William Byrd; from hymn-singing and requiems to the oratorios of Handel. As in the other arts, biblical influence on music has spread its wings beyond the experiences of the church-goer. With no little help from the books of Jeremiah and Daniel, Verdi would get his break through his opera *Nabucco* (recounting the dastardly deeds of Nebuchadnezzar II) and, even today, Regina Spektor can wow a crowd with performances of *Samson*.

The catalogue of composers who have found inspiration in the Bible is vast - from Palestrina to Handel, and from Mozart to Stravinsky - but none managed to relay the spirit of the text and message with more skill and dedication than Johann Sebastian Bach. Religious music was, after all, Bach's day job. His most industrious period fell between 1723 and 1750 when, as the cantor in Leipzig, Bach was expected to turn out a constant stream of music for four of the city's churches. Of all Bach's sacred music, the *St Matthew Passion* is arguably the most exquisite. The sense of atmosphere can be electrifying. The evangelist (a tenor) is contained within stretches of recitative and minimal accompaniment but, while this lends a sense of speech (of delivering a message), the lyricism of the music, however restrained, is utterly compelling. Other soloists sing the introspective musings of major characters and, from time to time, a double choir bursts forth. All told, this harmonically inventive piece comes as close as any work of art to conveying the sense of danger and tragedy that define the story of Jesus's last days. The piece fell out of fashion shortly after its first performance in 1727, but was a major beneficiary of the great Bach revival of the 19th century and has remained a staple of church and concert hall performances ever since. There is no better soundtrack to anyone's Easter.

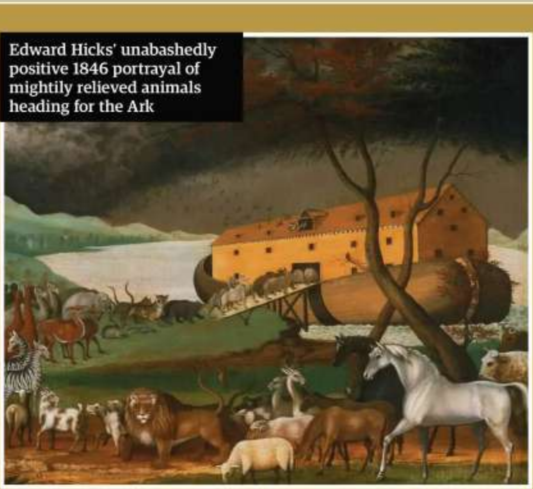
Bach, of course, was a follower of the Lutheran church and this was a happy geographical accident. Luther had been a keen supporter of liturgical musical, producing hymnals and possessing, so the story goes, a fine singing voice: one contemporary referred to him as the "Wittenberg nightingale". Other branches of Protestantism were more wary of music's influence. John Calvin was a keen advocate of congregations joining in with simple hymns: "Singing," he argued, "has great force and vigour to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God". But the words of such hymns had to come directly from the Bible (the Psalms being the most obvious point of call) and any instrumental music was frowned upon. Stirring

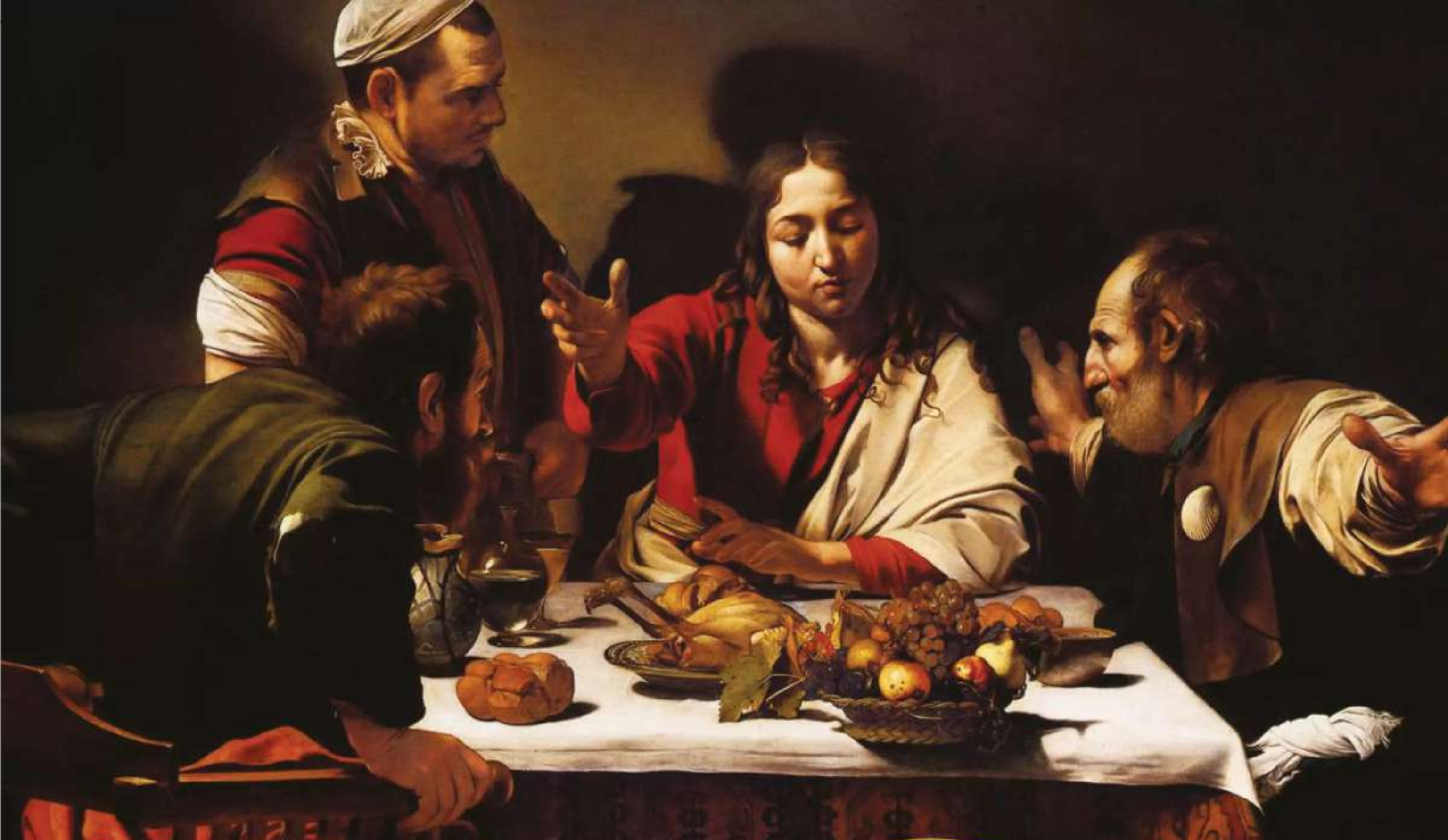
"RELIGIOUS MUSIC WAS JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH'S DAY JOB"

FOCUS ON THE FLOOD

Noah and his animals have proven to be a favourite topic for painters, writers and composers

The tale of Noah and the Flood has long been a gift to artists across many genres. It's perhaps most naturally suited to visual representation. Medieval artists produced many 'Noah cycles' on church walls (a fine example is the 12th-century version at Palermo's Palatine Chapel), and later painters explored the central tension of the story. In a work like Michelangelo's *Flood* fresco, panic is the order of the day. Sometimes, the promise of safety and cleansing is brought to the fore: in, for example, Margaret Gere's *Noah's Ark* of c.1909. On occasion, everything can seem positively jolly, as in the Quaker Edward Hicks' portrayal of the animals trotting towards the ark. Writers have also found inspiration in the famous Genesis story. Some see obvious allusions to the Flood in the water motif of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and it has a clear presence in more recent works such as Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners* and Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in Ten-and-a-Half Chapters*. Musical forays have been mixed. Donizetti's opera on the subject sank without trace for more than 150 years while Stravinsky's 1960s interpretation was simply odd. Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde* was, however, a triumph: though a piece specifically designed to be approachable by amateur performers, its status as a major composition was quickly recognised.


Edward Hicks' unabashedly positive 1846 portrayal of mightily relieved animals heading for the Ark

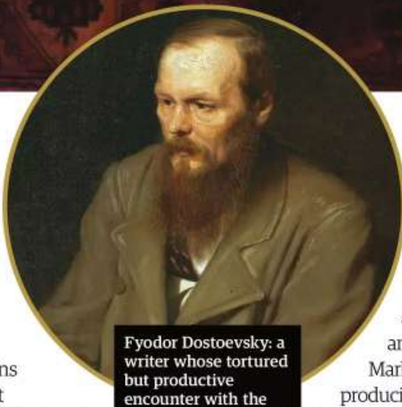


Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*, capturing the astonishment of Jesus's followers after the resurrection

a cappella renditions could still inspire admiration. The composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt visited Geneva in 1791, more than two centuries after Calvin's death, and was deeply impressed: "I have never been more moved by anything than by the four-part singing here," he reported. The contrast with the traditions in his native Germany was striking. Anyone "who is familiar only with our unison church singing, usually off-pitch screaming, can scarcely imagine the dignity and power".

While different traditions developed across the denominational spectrum, it is interesting to note that, within both Catholicism and many branches of Protestantism, composers were repeatedly drawn to favoured texts. An ideal example is provided by the collection of sayings uttered by Jesus on the cross, as recorded in the Gospels: the so-called Seven Last Words, which include familiar phrases such as "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and "It is finished." From Heinrich Schütz in the 17th century, to Gounod and Franck in the 19th, settings were eagerly developed. Perhaps the most famous version came from Haydn: a piece he revisited on many occasions, first as a work for orchestra, then for orchestra and chorus and, in perhaps its most accomplished form, for string quartet. Here, words were not required to convey the meaning and intent of biblical texts: a testimony to the devotional reach of music.

We must not assume, of course, that religious music always travelled down familiar paths. Bach, after all, was perfectly happy to intermingle biblical verses and freshly minted texts in his *Passions*. Sometimes, the most well-established biblical tales could inspire musical innovation of the highest order. Haydn's *Creation* oratorio, which seeks to convey the chaos of the universe's birth, contains some of the composer's most daring harmonic adventures. The trend continued with works such as Richard Strauss' 1905 *Salome* and, in *Moses and Aaron*, Schoenberg took bold steps in the direction of atonalism. The latter may not be everyone's musical cup of tea, but the style is well-suited to the subject matter, bringing the rivalry between Moses and Aaron into sharp focus: Moses is all about ideal, abstract understandings of God while his brother wants something he can grasp, prompting him to allow the construction of the golden calf.



Fyodor Dostoevsky: a writer whose tortured but productive encounter with the Bible can be glimpsed in all his major works

A HEADY MIX

The diversity of music inspired by the Bible reflects a trend that permeates all the arts. All those imposing Renaissance and Baroque paintings are wonderful, but then we also have Caravaggio. He tackled the old topics but brought unprecedented realism to the task and explored the play of light on a scene in the most innovative ways. In his *Supper at Emmaus* the faces and gestures of a handful of apostles say everything that needs to be said about the shock and puzzlement of discovering that Jesus had been resurrected. And if novelty could spring from thoughts about the Bible so, every now and again, could irreverence.

Mark Twain had great fun producing a mock diary written by Adam in Eden. The entries raise a chuckle. Eve arrives on the scene and Adam is not best pleased: "This new creature with the long hair is a good deal in the way... always hanging around and following me about." Adam wanted to describe his environment but "I get no chance to names things myself. The new creature names everything that comes along, before I can get to protest". The original battle of the sexes soon takes a sinister turn and signs of evil days to come begin to appear: "The new creature eats too much fruit," Adam complains, and before too long Adam is writing that "this morning found the new creature trying to clod apples out of that forbidden tree".

There is more than a little misogyny in Twain's comedy - hints of that old idea that everything went wrong when women arrived - but it's all still rather funny. At the very least, it reminds us that, like so many paintings, books and songs, the Bible has rarely been seen as a stale, predictable text. It has been mined, mauled and magnified in countless different ways.

THOU SHALT NOT...

The ancient Judaic and Christian writings that became the Bible were unique in bringing together religion and ethics

Words by Derek Wilson

There was a joke doing the rounds of the Greek philosophy schools in late antiquity. It went like this:

'Two cultic priests from different temples passed each other in the street. Having greeted each other briefly they passed on. As they did so, they both burst out laughing.'

The point of the joke was that many thinking Greeks had come to regard the complex rituals attending worship of the numerous gods and goddesses as ridiculous and with no bearing on real life. By the time of Jesus many Greeks were being drawn to Jewish monotheism. John 12:20-21 tells us that some Greeks were eager to meet Jesus, and when St Paul visited Athens, the intellectual centre of the Mediterranean world, he was invited to speak in the Areopagus, where men came to take part in religious debate.

THE LORD OUR GOD IS THE ONLY LORD

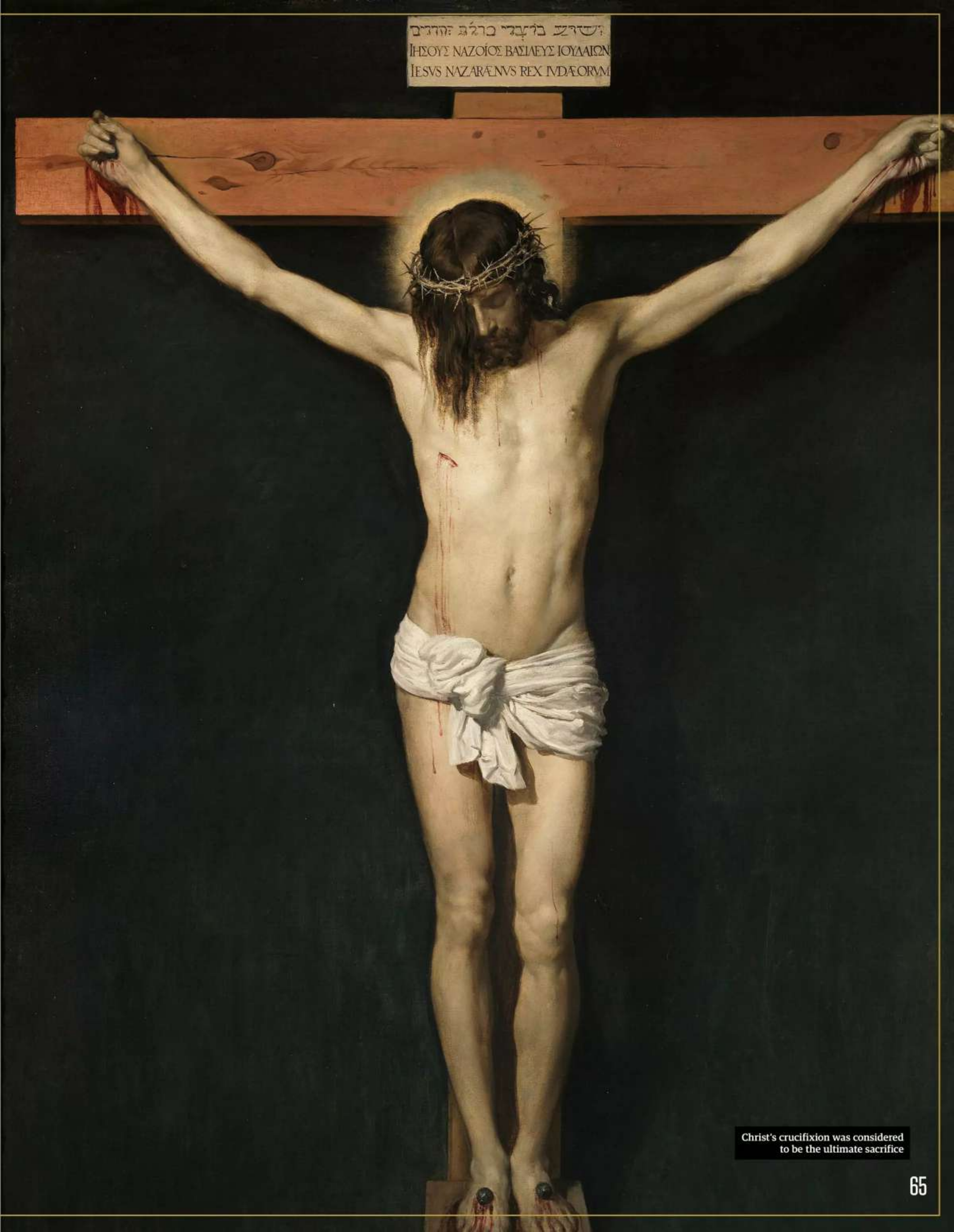
To understand this shift in religious attitudes we need to go back to the first written Old Testament texts (circa 1200 BC) and the oral tradition that predated them. When the Israelites became established as a settled people in Canaan (a territory centred on modern Palestine, though its borders fluctuated frequently over the centuries) they began to set down their beliefs and their history. The first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch (Greek - 'five scrolls'), traced the story from the creation of the universe to the rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, under the leadership of Moses, their settlement in Canaan and the ethical foundations of their society laid down by their god (his name is usually transliterated as 'Yahweh', though the Israelites and their descendants the Jews, considered him as being so holy that his name should not be spoken). The fundamental principle on which everything else depended and which also set them apart from all the other peoples of the Near and the Middle East was "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord" (Deuteronomy, 6:4). Thus monotheism entered the world.

It would be impossible to over-emphasise the importance of this revolutionary belief. All the nations, tribes and even, in many cases, families, had their own deities who demanded the performance of worship rituals, frequently including sacrifices. Israel's God would brook no rivals. He was the creator and sustainer of all things. What he required went far deeper than religious ceremonial - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). We will return to love shortly. What we must unpack first is the implications of monotheism. Pagan deities had their territories. Travellers through those territories were expected to honour the local gods and participate in their rites. Israelites were expressly forbidden to do any such thing. This set them apart from the rest of humanity. It followed from this that the Creator-God who had uniquely revealed himself to the Jews was the God of all humanity.

BE HOLY

The second - and almost as revolutionary - claim made by the Israelites was that their monotheism was an ethical monotheism. Yahweh imposed rules - laws - on his believers. The body of law was called the Torah and was so fundamental that 'Torah' is sometimes regarded as synonymous with 'Pentateuch'. The first five books of the Old Testament, but particularly Deuteronomy and Leviticus, deal in detail with the implications of living in obedience to a God who is the embodiment of moral perfection. Many of the laws concern the rites and ceremonies relating to worship, which eventually (circa 950 BCE) came to

> "ALL THE NATIONS, TRIBES AND EVEN SOME FAMILIES HAD THEIR OWN DEITIES WHO DEMANDED WORSHIP RITUALS. ISRAEL'S GOD WOULD BROOK NO RIVALS"


ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΝΑΖΟΙΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ
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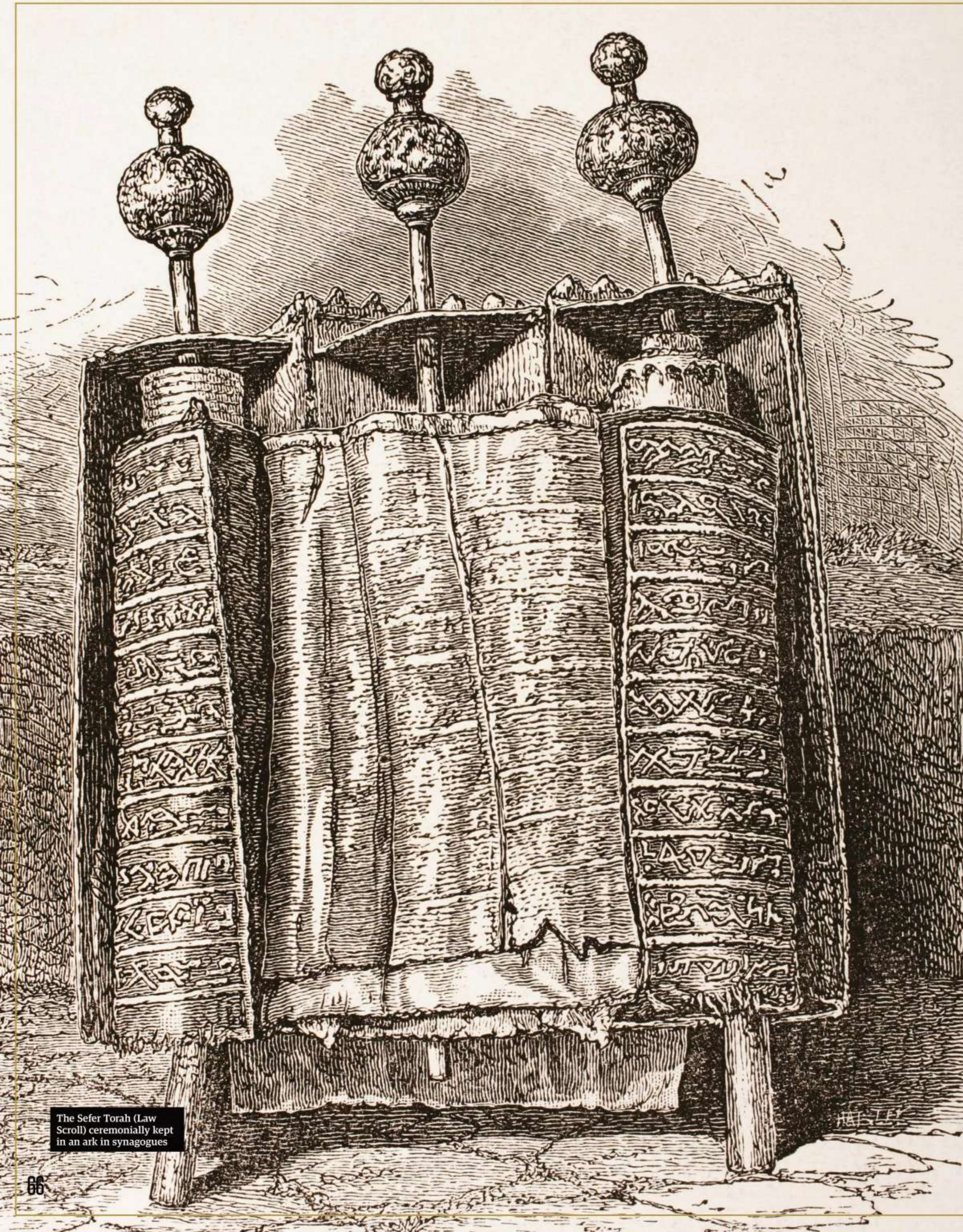
Christ's crucifixion was considered to be the ultimate sacrifice



The Sefer Torah (Law Scroll) ceremonially kept in an ark in synagogues be centred in the Jerusalem temple. But an ever-growing body of laws dealt with inter-personal relationships. How Jews were meant to relate to one another was summed up in Leviticus 19:18 - "Love your neighbour as you love yourself".

Here again Israelite religion was unique. Other ancient religions were either animistic - ie they worshipped nature gods - or polytheistic - ie they worshipped a variety of gods. Animism was morally neutral. Nature cannot be good or bad, it just is. Polytheism tended to envisage a realm inhabited by deities who were human beings 'writ large', displaying all the vices and virtues of mortals. They had values but were as likely to act out of envy, hatred, lust or mere caprice. An example of the latter can be found in the Babylonian story of the Great Flood. This major disaster featured in the records of several Middle Eastern peoples. In the Babylonian epic the flood was sent by the 'top god', Enlil. He decided to save one family - that of Utnapishtim - from the universal carnage simply because he liked him. The Old Testament version recorded the deliverance of Noah and his family, saved as the basis of new society because Noah was the only virtuous man in a wicked world.

Israel's God could only make ethical demands of his people because he was morally perfect: 'The Lord told Moses to say to the community of Israel, Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:1-2). He could also do this because he was involved in the day-to-day lives of his people. Again, this combination of perfection and participation in an imperfect world was unique. To some ancient thinkers, such as Heraclitus (circa 535 - 475 BCE), it seemed obvious that an all-powerful being who was the very embodiment of virtue could not 'soil his hands' with the morally tainted affairs of men. Their supreme being was remote and unapproachable. They were the ancestors of 18th-century deists who developed the image of the 'watchmaker God'. Having set creation 'ticking', he left it to its own devises.

THE GREATEST POEM, WHETHER OF ANCIENT OR MODERN LITERATURE

It was left for the poets of the Old Testament to grapple with the seeming triumph of lawlessness that sometimes seemed to support the idea of an absentee god. The writer of Psalm 94 was deeply moved by the apparent triumph of injustice:

"They kill widows and orphans
And murder the strangers who live in our land.
They say, 'The Lord does not see us;
The God of Israel does not notice'" (Psalm 94:6-7).

From very earliest times thinkers grappled with the sufferings of good people and the apparent flourishing of evil. The Book of Job is generally accepted as the oldest book in the biblical canon, having its origin in pre-Mosaic times. It concerns the appalling series of disasters which befell Job, a faithful worshipper of God. His friends make various attempts to explain his misfortunes before God, in person, intervenes to point out, in what Tennyson called "the greatest poem, whether of ancient or modern literature", that, although his activity is beyond human understanding, he is involved in his creation and he does care about his human creatures. In a word, God loves what he has made.

THUS SAYS THE LORD

The importance of love was explicit from the time the law was given: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength". This was demanded as a response to God's demonstrated love for his people - primarily in delivering them from slavery in Egypt and establishing them securely as a settled nation. The law established a covenant or agreement between God and Israel but it was never a cold, calculating deal involving divine blessing in return for the obedience of the people or punishment as a consequence of disobedience.

It was left largely to the Old Testament prophets to hammer out what this loving relationship actually meant. Writing over a period from around 870 to 400 BCE, these forthtellers (rather than foretellers) explored at a deeper level the nature of God and his dealings with his people in the form of biography, visions, warnings and promises. Whereas the Torah was a take-it-or-leave-it legal code, the prophetic writings made readers aware of what lay behind the law. The first point to note about their message was that it was direct. Most of the canonical prophets were not cultic specialists or teachers of the law. They were selected by God to be his messengers. The claim "Thus says the Lord" appears more than 1,200 times in the prophetic writings.

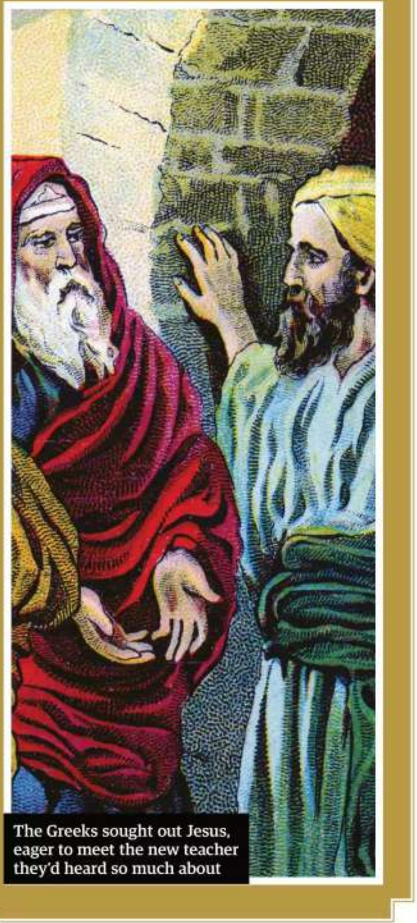
Secondly, the prophets spoke from personal experience. The stories of men such as Jonah and Daniel were dramatic, enthralling accounts of how God dealt with his chosen spokesmen and - by extension - how he would deal with his people at large. Some writings are 'enacted prophecies'. For example, the 8th-century prophet Hosea, married a woman called Gomer, who proved unfaithful but, instead of imposing the harsh penalty of the law for adultery, he forgave her and took her back. This was an analogy for the relationship between God and

"THE PROPHETIC WRITINGS MADE READERS AWARE OF WHAT LAY BEHIND THE LAW"

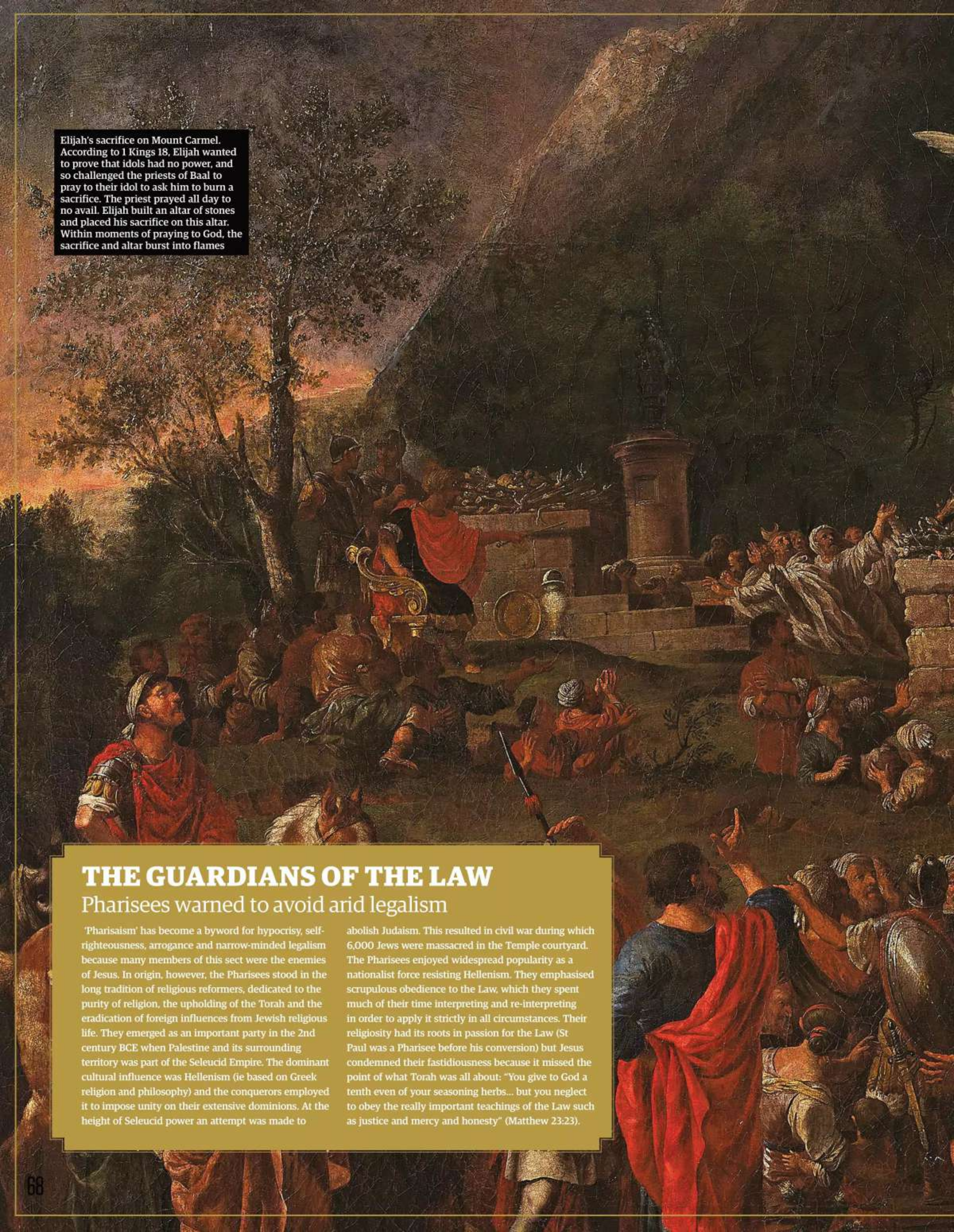
GOING TO THE PAGANS

Remarkable timing

There is a passage in the chapter of John's Gospel which, at first sight, is puzzling. It comes immediately before the climax of the story on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some Greeks have come to Jerusalem and they ask to be introduced to this strange teacher everyone is talking about. Jesus' response seems to be a non-sequitur. "The time has come for the Son of Man (ie himself) to be glorified" (12:20-21). He goes on to talk about his impending suffering and its significance. This passage indicates, first of all, that some of the Greeks, the intellectual leaders of the Mediterranean world, were being attracted to the Jews' religion of ethical monotheism. The timing was significant. The Jesus movement began at a time when sophisticated Greco-Roman thinkers were turning their backs on pagan polytheism. Viewed from the other side, it appears from Jesus' reaction that he recognised that the culmination of his earthly ministry involved the spread of belief in the God of the Jews to the Gentile world and that the time for this momentous event had come.



The Greeks sought out Jesus, eager to meet the new teacher they'd heard so much about

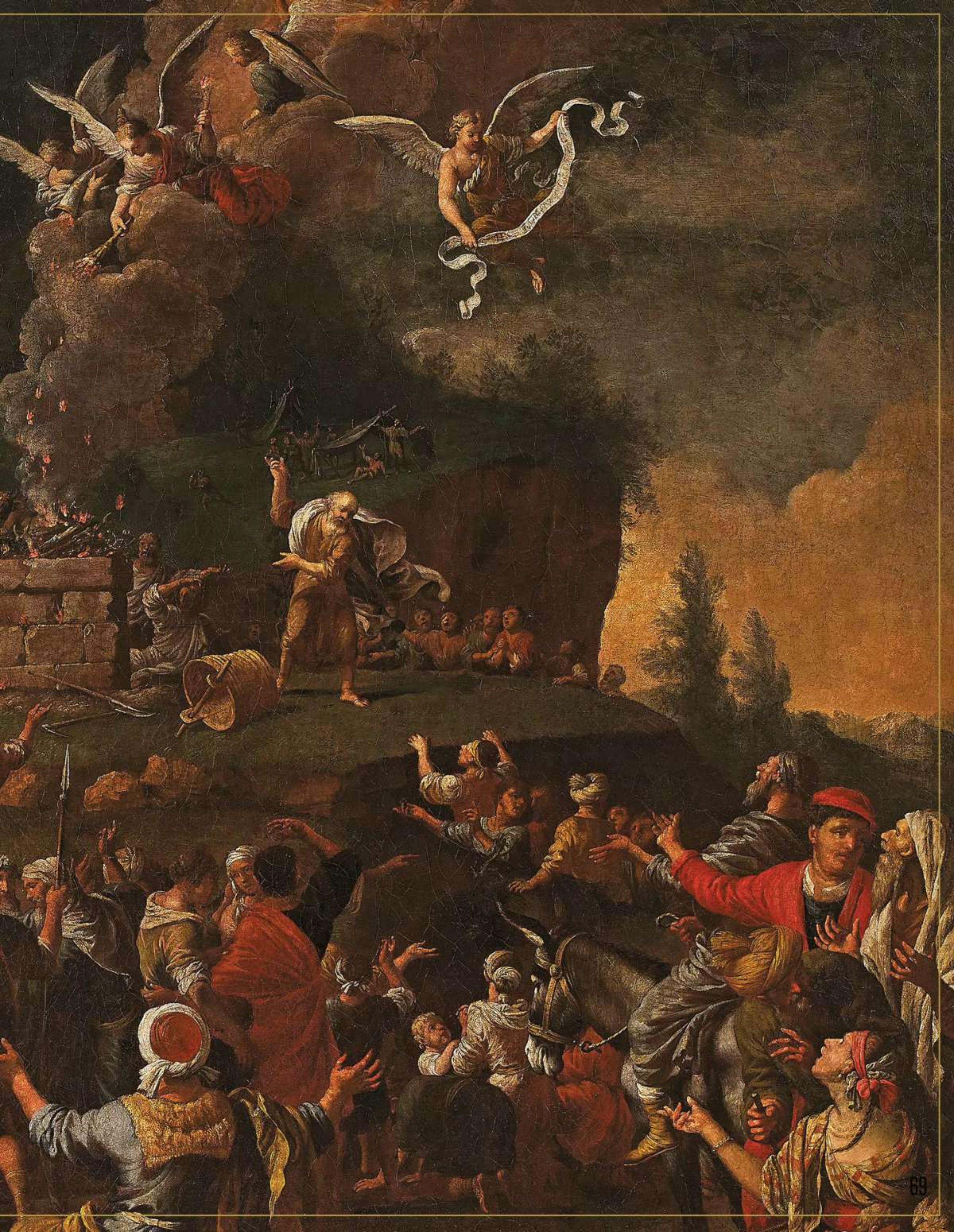


Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel. According to 1 Kings 18, Elijah wanted to prove that idols had no power, and so challenged the priests of Baal to pray to their idol to ask him to burn a sacrifice. The priest prayed all day to no avail. Elijah built an altar of stones and placed his sacrifice on this altar. Within moments of praying to God, the sacrifice and altar burst into flames

THE GUARDIANS OF THE LAW

Pharisees warned to avoid arid legalism

'Pharisaism' has become a byword for hypocrisy, self-righteousness, arrogance and narrow-minded legalism because many members of this sect were the enemies of Jesus. In origin, however, the Pharisees stood in the long tradition of religious reformers, dedicated to the purity of religion, the upholding of the Torah and the eradication of foreign influences from Jewish religious life. They emerged as an important party in the 2nd century BCE when Palestine and its surrounding territory was part of the Seleucid Empire. The dominant cultural influence was Hellenism (ie based on Greek religion and philosophy) and the conquerors employed it to impose unity on their extensive dominions. At the height of Seleucid power an attempt was made to abolish Judaism. This resulted in civil war during which 6,000 Jews were massacred in the Temple courtyard. The Pharisees enjoyed widespread popularity as a nationalist force resisting Hellenism. They emphasised scrupulous obedience to the Law, which they spent much of their time interpreting and re-interpreting in order to apply it strictly in all circumstances. Their religiosity had its roots in passion for the Law (St Paul was a Pharisee before his conversion) but Jesus condemned their fastidiousness because it missed the point of what Torah was all about: "You give to God a tenth even of your seasoning herbs... but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law such as justice and mercy and honesty" (Matthew 23:23).



Among the ruins of several pagan shrines on the Areopagus a later age placed this plaque of the Christian address Paul gave there

Israel. God's people had gone off to worship other gods. At first God promises severe retribution but he goes on to declare:

"How can I give you up, Israel?
How can I abandon you?
My heart will not let me do it.
My love for you is too strong.
I will not punish you in my anger
I will not destroy Israel again.
For I am God, and not man" (Hosea 11:8-9).

The words encapsulate the dilemma of a religion based on ethical monotheism. How can a perfect God be in communion with his imperfect chosen people? Making sacrifice in the temple provided the only means of restoring people's relationship with God when the law had been broken, but the prophet Micah, whose life overlapped with Hosea's, pointed out the inadequacy of the ritual system.

"Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or an endless stream of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? No... what he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love and to live in humble fellowship with God" (Micah 6:7-8).

ONLY ANOTHER DIVINE INITIATIVE COULD SOLVE THE PROBLEM

That was still as impossible for the vast majority of people as it had been at the time of the Flood. And, if that was the case, nothing could rescue the creation from continuing in a downward spiral as the result of human misuse. It was a no-win situation and the historical books of the Old Testament provide a remarkably honest record of the roller-coaster relations between God and his people. Only another divine initiative could solve the problem.

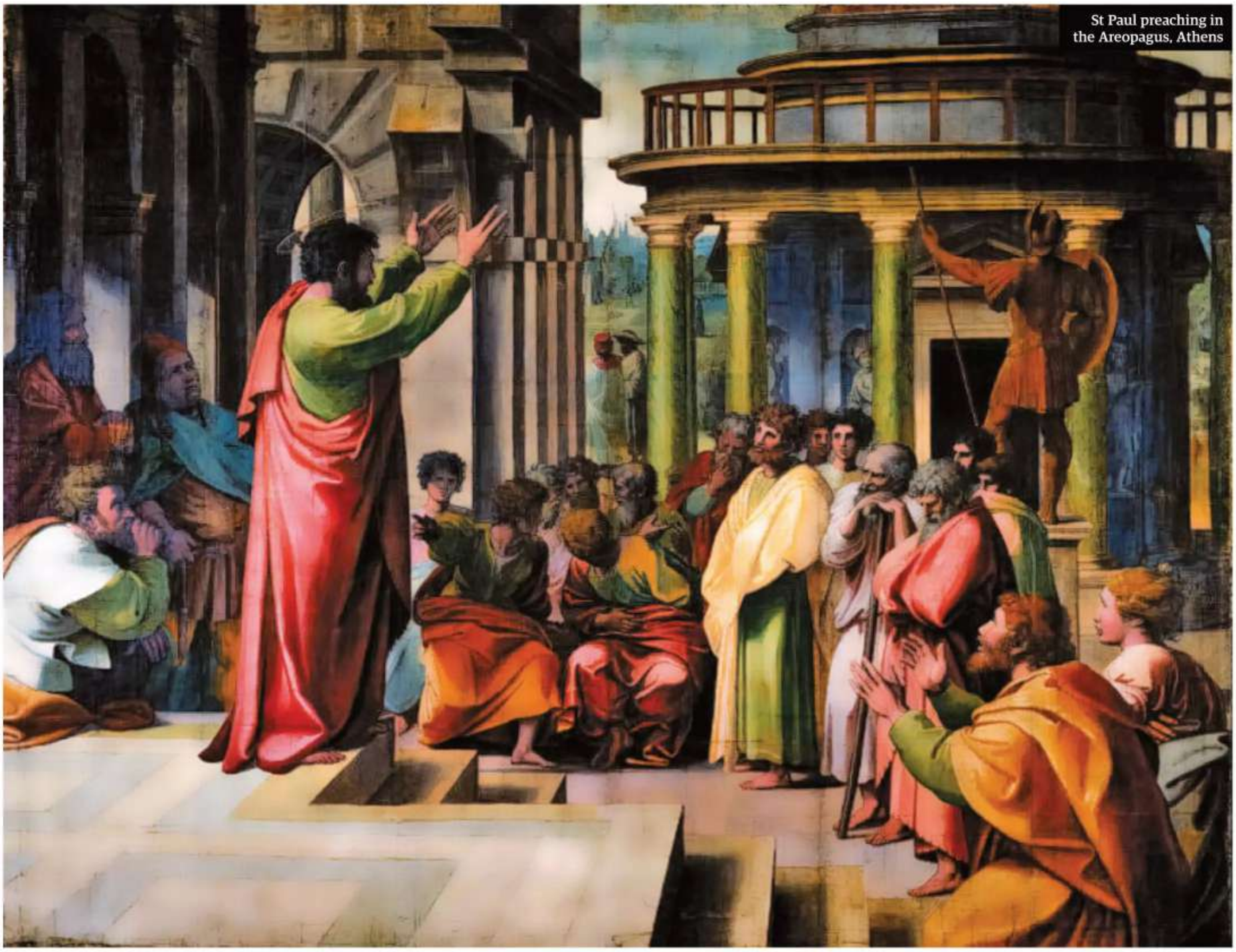
That takes us to the New Testament. The event we're reminded of every Christmas was a unique innovation, quite unlike anything recorded in any other body of religious writing: the Creator entered his own creation in human form to establish a 'New Covenant'. Did this mean that the law was scrapped? Not according to Jesus. Though he was accused often of overthrowing the legal system he categorically rejected the charge. "Do not think I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets," he insisted. "I have not come to do away with them but to make their teachings come true... as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the law will be done away with" (Matthew 5:17-18).

The foundation of Jesus' argument against his critics, the experts in the law, was that they'd missed the fundamental connection between law and love. Respect for the law had degenerated into legalism. The Torah had come to consist of 613 do's and don'ts, covering all the minutiae of human conduct. Instead of providing people with a framework for virtuous living, it tied them in knots. When Jesus was challenged to declare which of the 613 rules he considered the most important he reiterated the basics: "Love God with all your heart soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself. This is more important than offering animals and other sacrifices to God" (Mark 12:30-33).

This challenging of the legal system was one of the reasons why the Jewish religious leaders plotted to have him killed. It remains a major point of issue between Jews and Christians. The followers of Jesus were accused of abandoning morality. They were charged with 'antinomianism', of believing that it did not matter how people behaved as long as they believed that Jesus was an emanation of God, the long-promised saviour of his people - the Messiah.

YOU STUPID GALATIANS!

It was left to St Paul in his letters to various groups of Christian believers to explain just how faith in Jesus, the Christ, and virtuous behaviour were related. When the young church in the Roman province of Galatia fell under the control of Jewish teachers who were reintroducing legal proscriptions, Paul saw red. "You stupid Galatians!' he exclaimed. "Who bewitched you? ... did you receive God's Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the good news [of Christ] and believing it?" (Galatians 3:1-2). The 'good news' was that the death of Christ on a Roman cross was the sacrifice which obviated all other sacrifices demanded by the Law and made possible the permanent reconciliation of God and man. It declared God's love for his creation and prompted the response of human love. And that love, in its turn, moves believers to please God by obeying his commands. One of the later New Testament writers put it simply: "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:10) And St Paul declared: "To love is to embrace the whole law" (Romans 13:10).



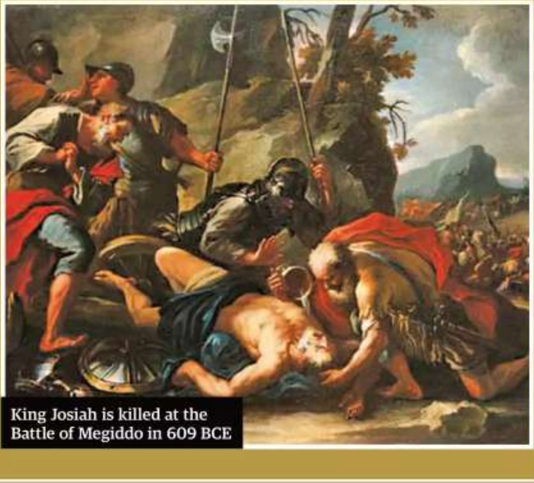
St Paul preaching in the Areopagus, Athens

A SIGNIFICANT DISCOVERY

How a long-lost scroll prompted a religious reform

King Josiah, who ruled Judea (the southern kingdom after the northern territory had seceded following the death of King Solomon in 931 BCE) was one of the great hero monarchs of the nation. "There had never been a king like him before who served the Lord with all his heart mind and strength ... nor has there been a king like him since" - so wrote the chronicler (2 Kings 23:25). It was during his reign (640-609 BCE) that a great religious reform took place. It began when some builders, doing repair work in the temple, stumbled across a lost scroll of the Law. It seems to have been the section of what we now know as Deuteronomy, which elaborated on the Ten Commandments (chapters 5-26).

Josiah, concluding that Judea's misfortunes were the result of apostasy, destroyed all foreign shrines and objects of idolatry, expelled or killed magicians, made the temple the focal point of all Yahweh worship, restored neglected festivals such as Passover, and, with great ceremony, renewed the Mosaic covenant between God and his people. Having re-established the supremacy of the Torah, Josiah embarked on a politico-military programme that might have led to the reuniting of Israel and its establishment as a major player in the affairs of the Middle East. Unfortunately, while fighting the Egyptians at the Battle of Megiddo in 609 BCE, the king was slain. His religious reforms survived as his legacy.



King Josiah is killed at the Battle of Megiddo in 609 BCE

I DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR

From Thomas Jefferson to Tony Blair, discover the contrasting political influence of the Bible on each side of the Atlantic

Words by Scott Reeves

On 20 January 2009, more than one million people amassed outside the US Capitol in Washington, DC to watch the historic inauguration of the first African-American President of the United States. Barack Obama stood before Chief Justice John Roberts and placed his hand on a Bible held by his wife, Michelle. Prompted by Roberts, Obama repeated the oath of office: "I do solemnly swear that I will execute the Office of President of the United States faithfully, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. So help me God."

However, commentators were quick to point out that Obama - probably due to Roberts stumbling over his prompts - actually used incorrect wording. He should have said "I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States", but the word "faithfully" was spoken in the wrong place. The following evening, Roberts and Obama repeated the oath, this time correctly, before a small group of reporters in the White House.

That Obama was keen to ensure he took the oath in exactly the manner prescribed in the Constitution indicates how important he considered it to be. That he placed his hand on a Bible - the same used by Abraham Lincoln in his 1861 inauguration - while swearing it indicates the importance of the Bible and religion as a whole in American politics.

The traditional of incoming presidents taking the oath of office while touching a Bible with their left hand began with the first inauguration in 1789, when George Washington borrowed a Bible from the Grand Freemason Lodge in New York and kissed it afterwards. Nearly every subsequent president has followed Washington's example and used a meaningful Bible during their inauguration. Only John Quincy Adams, Franklin Pierce and Theodore Roosevelt chose not to take the oath with a Bible, with Adams and Pierce electing to hold a book of law representing the Constitution. Lyndon B Johnson clutched a Roman Catholic missal during his oath, since that was all that could be found on Air Force One after John F Kennedy's assassination.

At some point in history - possibly as early as George Washington, although it is unclear - the oath took on further religious significance when presidents began to add "So help me God." Although the Constitution does not include this phrase, the oaths of office required for judges and other offices

"JEFFERSON'S SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE HAS NOT STOPPED AMERICAN POLITICS BEING INFLUENCED BY RELIGION"

Barack Obama fluffs his words during the Presidential oath of office while his wife holds a copy of the Bible used by Abraham Lincoln in 1861

Many feared that President John F. Kennedy would be loyal to Pope Paul VI above his country

of state do include it. Most 20th-century presidents have included the codicil, although Theodore Roosevelt again chose to ignore it - he concluded with "And thus I swear".

Yet, as Roosevelt's own addition illustrated, he did choose to swear his oath. The Constitution allows presidents to affirm the oath instead of swearing, probably due to the fact that Quaker teaching suggests that Friends should not swear oaths, taking a literal reading of the Epistle of James: "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation." Ironically, the only president to affirm rather than swear the oath was an Episcopalian, Franklin Pierce; the two Quaker presidents, Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon, were happy to swear.

WALL OF SEPARATION

In the early years of the American republic, when the first presidential oaths were sworn, the relationship between church and state was a thorny issue. Despite the hopes of George Washington, political debate quickly coalesced into a party-based system. The Federalists, who included the second president John Adams and influential secretary of the treasury Alexander Hamilton in their ranks, were closely linked to the Congregational church. They frequently claimed that their Republican opponents were non-religious, despite having many Baptists and Methodists among their number.

Republican Thomas Jefferson scraped to victory in the 1800 presidential election despite being portrayed as anti-religion. Perhaps due to this form of campaigning, Jefferson chose to take a literal interpretation of the first Constitutional amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In order to ensure the freedom of worship for all religions, Jefferson determined to build a "wall of separation" between church and government.

Jefferson's separation of church and state continues to the present day, but that has not stopped American politics being influenced by religion at every level. Questioning John F Kennedy's repeated use of the word 'God' in his inaugural address, sociologist Robert Bellah wrote, "The separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension."

Kennedy himself was the only Catholic president to date despite Catholicism being the largest denomination in the USA. Yet when Jefferson first pronounced the separation of church and state, Catholics numbered only 1% of the population - their numbers exploded from the 1840s, when a flood of migrants from Germany, Ireland and Italy joined the famed melting pot in search of the American dream. These immigrants were almost solidly Democrat voters, primarily because the Nativist movement gained little ground within Democrat ranks. Nativism - the fierce opposition to Catholicism as anti-American - saw organised violence against Catholics, including the burning of property and murder, and found political expression in the short-lived Know Nothing Party, whose nominee won 21.5% of the popular vote in the 1856 presidential election.

Anti-Catholic prejudice continued to influence politics on a national level into the 20th century, despite Catholics dominating local politics in several cities like Boston, Chicago and New York. Not until 1928 did a Catholic contest the presidential election. Al Smith lost that particular contest to Herbert Hoover and, although Smith was unlikely to ever win since the incumbent Hoover rode the crest of a burgeoning economy, anti-Catholic feeling likely increased the scale of defeat. Even when Kennedy won the election of 1960, many believed that JFK would take orders from the Pope that were detrimental to US interests, although Kennedy probably won more votes than he lost as a result of his religion since Catholics rallied to support him.

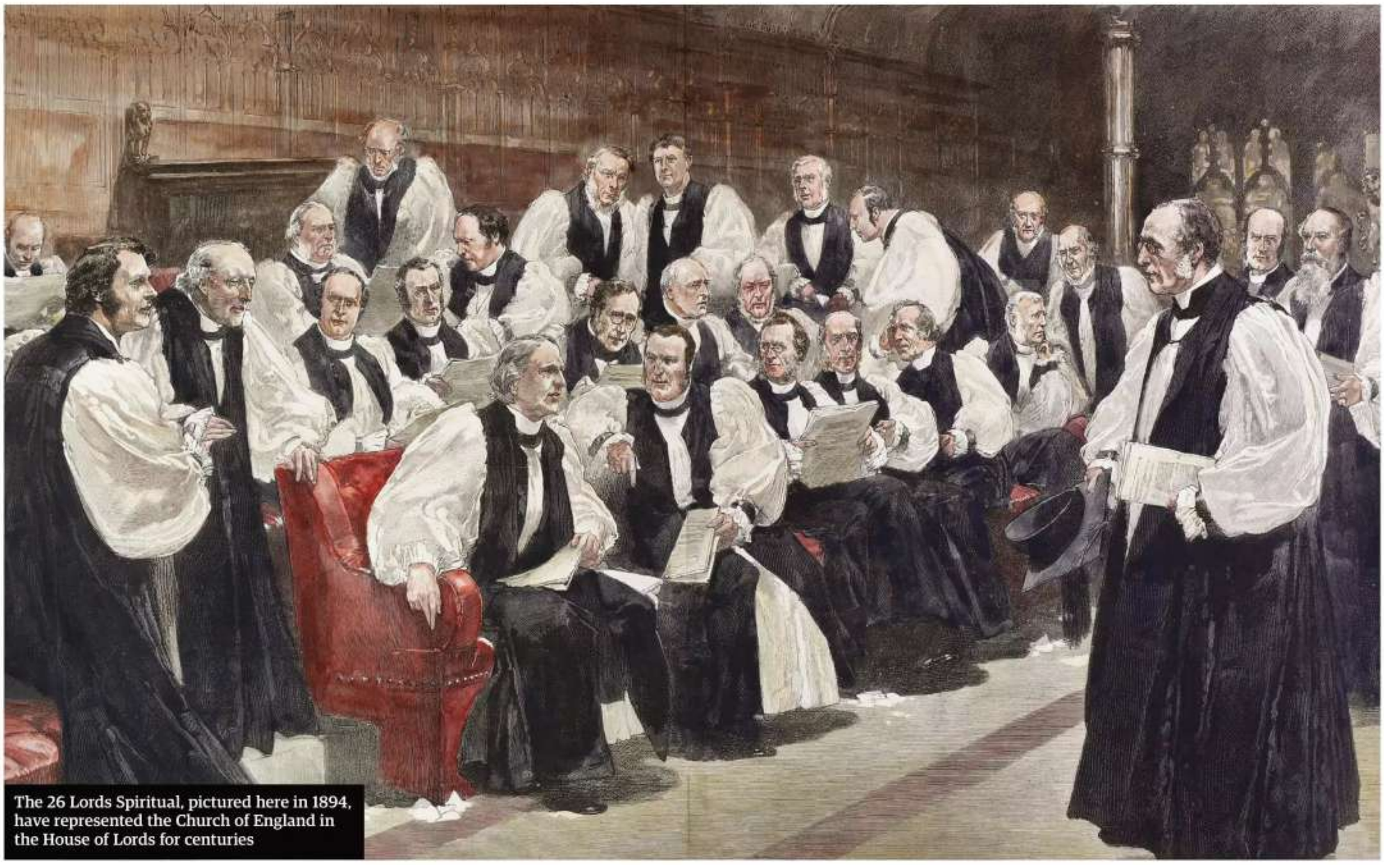
I HAVE A DREAM

Perhaps the biggest influence the Christian church has had on American politics came in its leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. The racial segregation that occurred after the Civil War affected all areas of society, including religion. Black people went to black churches; white people went to white churches. By the 1950s, the Federal Council of Churches and National Council of Churches had begun to oppose racial segregation in religion. The annual Race Relations Sunday encouraged black and white congregations to join together to worship.

In 1954, as churches were beginning to agitate against segregation, a 25-year-old pastor named Martin Luther King was appointed to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The following year, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, in violation of the Jim Crow laws. The chairman of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, E D Nixon, elected to lead a boycott of buses in Montgomery to draw attention to the unfairness of racial segregation on public transport.

However, although Nixon was the initiator of the boycott, he realised that its moral authority would be greater if he could persuade local churches to support it. King, the third minister he called, swiftly became its figurehead and leader. During the 385-day boycott which led to a district court ruling ending bus segregation in the city, the new pastor of a small Baptist church became a national political figure. King was well aware that his new stature brought with it difficulties - he was arrested during the boycott and his house was bombed - but he continued to take a leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1957 he became the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a coalition of church leaders opposed to segregation in churches and throughout society.

King's approach to civil rights was grounded in Christianity and the Bible. In his most famous speech, delivered in Washington, DC in 1963, King famously declared "I have a dream." In that dream,



The 26 Lords Spiritual, pictured here in 1894, have represented the Church of England in the House of Lords for centuries

King said that, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together" - a direct quote from Isaiah 40:4-5. Many of his other speeches and sermons drew inspiration from Christian Scripture or, in the case of "Paul's Letter to American Christians" preached in 1956, imagined what the apostle Paul would write about 20th-century racial segregation.

King was not the only church leader who played an active role in the Civil Rights Movement. King's own mentor when he first took up the pulpit in Montgomery was Ralph Abernathy, senior pastor at the First Baptist Church. It was Abernathy who first suggested the idea of the bus boycott to E D Nixon, but Abernathy recognised that King's great charisma would make him a better figurehead. After King was assassinated, Abernathy took over the SCLC.

Preceding the SCLC was the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, founded by Fred Shuttlesworth, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham. It coordinated mass meetings and demonstrations, culminating in the Birmingham Campaign, a movement designed to draw attention to the deeply segregated city. Shuttlesworth aimed to provoke mass arrests by organising sit-ins and marches, and succeeded in keeping the vast majority of protest non-violent despite regular confrontations with the authorities and the violent response of white supremacists.

In one of the most infamous crimes against civil rights campaigners, the church became a physical target. On 15 September 1963, three members of the Ku Klux Klan planted 19 sticks of dynamite by the basement of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church - a regular pulpit from which King and Shuttlesworth spoke. They exploded at 10.22am, killing four young girls who were preparing for a Youth Day service.

The bombing showed that no place was safe, but it was not a one-off. Four African-American churches were bombed in Montgomery in 1957, and two burned in Bessemer. In 1964, two black people were killed when a church used to register black voters was bombed. By attacking the churches, the white supremacists were attacking the heart of the black community, and the place in which many civil rights organisations held meetings and roused support.

However, the campaign of terror failed and the Civil Rights Movement, in particular King's campaign of non-violence inspired by the Bible, was ultimately successful. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended racial segregation, while the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited racial discrimination in voting.

Baptist minister Jesse Jackson campaigned unsuccessfully for the Democrat Presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988

BIBLE BELT

Christian interpretations of the Bible continue to impact on American politics to the present day. Compared to most developed countries, the USA has a remarkably high level of religious affiliation, although the picture is not uniform across the country. In the states on the western coast, only 59% of people report that they believe in God. In parts of the Bible Belt across the south - typically considered to be North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas - this rises to 86%, aided by a strong attachment to evangelical Christianity.

Across the United States, but particularly in the Bible Belt, politicians - particularly Republicans - frequently refer to religion. Usually, this involves an attempt to woo the Christian right who seek to apply their understanding of the teachings of Christianity to politics by adopting socially conservative positions on abortion and

NO MORE BIRMINGHAMS

The Baptist church became a target during the Civil Rights movement when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed

contraception, embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia, homosexuality, marriage, pornography, school prayer and sex education.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the Roe v Wade decision, set down by the Supreme Court in 1973, which declared state rules restricting abortion to be unconstitutional. This landmark ruling, which legalised abortion in many states, was subsequently opposed by Republican Presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H Bush and George W Bush. Donald Trump's appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court in 2018 arose partly due to Kavanaugh's pro-life position. In contrast, Democrat Presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama supported the Roe v Wade judgement, voicing their support for a woman's right to abortion.

As a result of the Republican Party adopting more socially conservative viewpoints and aligning themselves to the Christian right, the Bible Belt states of Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas have voted for the Republican candidate in every presidential election since 1980; in Oklahoma the trend stretches back even further to 1968.

Across the whole of the United States, majorities of churchgoers tend to vote Republican. Around three-quarters of evangelical Christians voted for George W Bush in 2000 and 2004, and 70% for Republican candidates for the House of Representatives in 2006. In the 2004 presidential

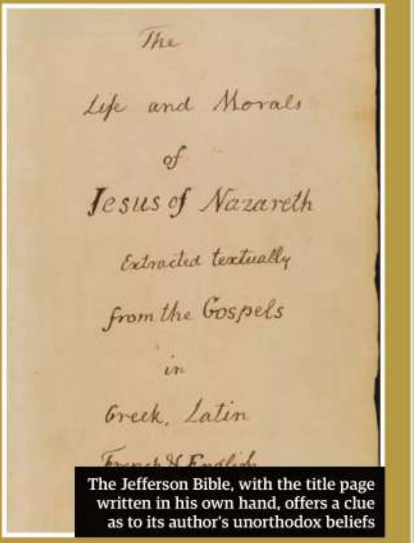
THE JEFFERSON BIBLE

Uncover the unorthodox beliefs of the third American president

Thomas Jefferson was instrumental in ensuring that the separation of church and state allowed all Americans the freedom to worship as they pleased. However, his own religious beliefs were anything but ordinary.

In 1820, 11 years after he had left the White House, Jefferson completed a book he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. The Jefferson Bible, as it came to be known, wasn't actually written by the former president. Instead, it was a 'cut-and-paste' job – Jefferson cut out portions of the New Testament with a razor and glued them onto new pages. He arranged extracts from four Gospels in chronological order, but what's most interesting is what he *didn't* include. Missing are the miracles, the resurrection and any passage that declared Jesus to be divine.

Jefferson's Bible indicates that he was drawn to the moral doctrines of Christianity, but was troubled by the supernatural elements of Scripture. He considered the Bible to be "so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture". Although his beliefs probably came closest to Unitarianism and he attended some Unitarian services, he never officially joined a church. Later in life, he wrote, "I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know."


The

Life and Morals

of

Jesus of Nazareth

Extracted textually

from the Gospels

in

Greek, Latin

French & English

The Jefferson Bible, with the title page written in his own hand, offers a clue as to its author's unorthodox beliefs

> “FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, CHURCH OF ENGLAND BISHOPS HAVE SAT IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS”

election, 61% of ballots from voters who attended church weekly went to Republican George W Bush, compared to 47% of occasional attendees. Of those who never attend church, only 36% voted Republican.

But that is not to suggest that the Republican Party have a monopoly on Christian voters. Although the Democrat Party's stronghold is on the west coast and in New England - areas that have a lower rate of religious affiliation - it does draw considerable support from African-American churches, especially the Baptist congregation. Continuing the tradition of Baptist political activism, Jesse Jackson - a Baptist minister and civil rights campaigner who worked under Martin Luther King from 1965 and was present during his assassination - began to seek political office. He ran for the Democrat nomination for the presidency in 1984 and 1988, finishing in third and second place respectively.

However, there is little doubt that one of the traditional Democrat church powerbases, Catholicism, has eroded in recent years. A narrow majority of Catholics voted for George W Bush in 2004, despite his opponent John Kerry being Catholic - although the Catholic community's lukewarm reception for Kerry may have arisen from him being at odds with their church's teaching on abortion and same-sex marriage.

Alternatively, perhaps the Catholic example is an indication that the influence of religion on voter behaviour is simply decreasing. Although 71% of Americans identify as Christian, this is down from 86% in 1990. In the same time period, the number of people who consider themselves to have no religious affiliation has risen from 2% to 23%. Voting patterns may be less influenced by the pulpit and more by other issues: the economy, immigration, policing and crime, education, social cohesion.

“WE DON'T DO GOD”

The Bible may be decreasing in influence on American politics, but it is still has a profound effect. In the UK, the situation is somewhat different. Only 59% of British people declared themselves to be Christian in the 2011 Census, with 25% declaring that they had no religion. A poll for *The Guardian* in 2006 suggested that the active membership of churches was even lower, with only a third of people declaring themselves to be religious.

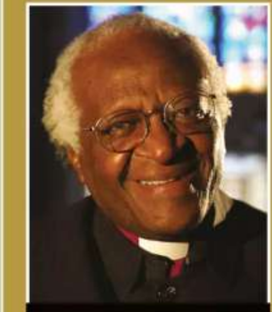
One of those who did have a strong religious faith was Tony Blair, who became Prime Minister in 1997. Before entering Downing Street, he wrote a newspaper article in which he compared the struggles of Pontius Pilate to a politician, saying that the prefect of Roman Judea was “caught on the horns of an age-old political dilemma... the struggle between what is right and what is expedient.” Blair would pray and read the Bible before making any important decisions. He later reflected on the invasion of Iraq, “I think if you have faith about these things, you realise that judgement is made by other people... and if you believe in God, it's made by God as well.”

However, although Blair considered faith to be an important part of his decision-making process, his political advisers were careful to keep his use of the Bible a private matter. When the Prime Minister was interviewed by *Vanity Fair* in 2003, Press Secretary Alastair Campbell interrupted a faith question with the blunt retort, “We don't do God.” Blair was also advised against ending an address to the nation on the Iraq War with the words “God bless you.” It has also been suggested that Blair's conversion to Roman Catholicism, which was announced a few months after he left office in 2007, was deliberately delayed in order to prevent it becoming a political distraction while he was in Downing Street.

As Leader of the Liberal Democrats between 2015 and 2017 and also a committed evangelical Christian, Tim Farron did have to manage his faith in a public arena. During the 2017 general election campaign, Farron was repeatedly asked about his religious faith and whether it impacted upon his policy decisions. Specific attention was placed upon whether he agreed with passages in the Bible that interpreted gay sex to be a sin, a position that would have placed him at odds with his party's platform to legalise same-sex marriage. Although he claimed that it was not a sin, Farron later admitted that he believed that he had compromised the Bible's teachings. Rather than campaigning on an explicitly religious platform, as many American politicians do in the Bible Belt, Farron felt it necessary to get the issue of his faith “off my table”. Ultimately, he chose to resign the leadership of the Liberal Democrats after the election, saying that he was

THE BIBLE AND APARTHEID

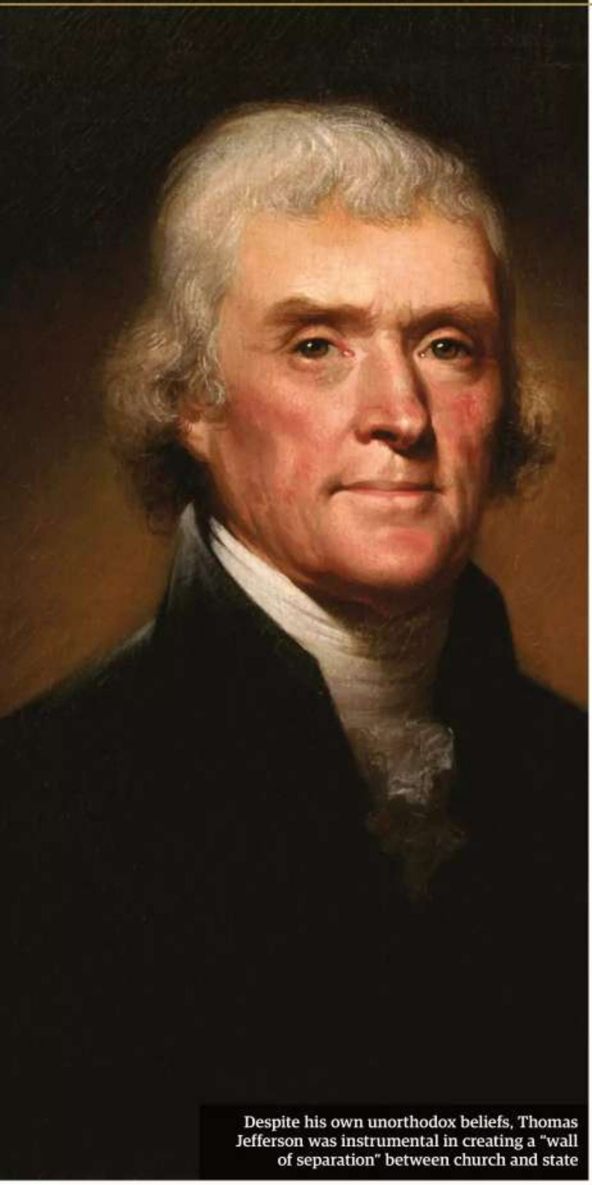
Both pro- and anti-apartheid campaigners used Scripture to back up their moral arguments



Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 during his anti-apartheid campaign

The racial segregation that occurred in South Africa between 1948 and 1991 was phenomenally unpopular around the world, but the South African government continued the repression of blacks long after internal resistance and external protests began, partly because the National Party drew upon Scripture to justify apartheid. In particular, pro-apartheid politicians pointed to Acts 17:26: "From our one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and He allotted the time of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live."

However, many churches around the world were opposed to apartheid, most famously Desmond Tutu. He rose to become Archbishop of Cape Town, the most senior position in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, and a prominent anti-apartheid campaigner. Tutu used the Bible as part of his campaign to promote tolerance and inclusivity, drawing attention to Galatians 3:28 in particular: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Ultimately, it was anti-apartheid campaigners who triumphed, but not before 43 years of racial segregation had been inflicted on South Africa.



Despite his own unorthodox beliefs, Thomas Jefferson was instrumental in creating a "wall of separation" between church and state

Tony Blair famously didn't "do God" while Prime Minister and waited until he left office to convert to Catholicism

"torn between living as a faithful Christian and serving as a political leader".

LORDS SPIRITUAL

Yet, despite the influence of the Bible on politicians being seen by many in the British media and electorate as a problem, the Church of England retains an institutional role within the British political hierarchy. Unlike in the USA, where the separation of church and state is enshrined in the Constitution, the UK has an established state religion. For hundreds of years, Church of England bishops (but not those of the Church of Scotland and Church of Ireland) have sat in the House of Lords. Since the Reformation, 26 Church of England bishops have comprised the Lords Spiritual: those from Canterbury, York, Durham, Winchester and London together with the 21 longest-serving bishops from 40 other dioceses.

Although the most obvious function of the Lords Spiritual is to read prayers at the beginning of each day, and despite together only comprising 3% of the House of Lords, they wield real power. They're able to speak in debates and, having no party affiliation, are not constrained by party politics or whips. Away from Parliament, the Archbishop of Canterbury often strays into political territory in his New Year message; his 2018 speech highlighted a lack of social support for 'the forgotten' in poverty, which was seen as a criticism of Conservative policy. The Archbishop also joined with the Archbishop of York prior to the 2015 and 2017 General Elections in writing an open letter to voters, with the 2015 letter being criticised for showing an alleged pro-Labour bias.

Yet, despite having no party affiliation, bishops in the Church of England are a political appointment, at least in name. When a position becomes vacant, a commission meets several times and decides on a shortlist of two names to be given to the Prime Minister. Since 2007, when Gordon Brown - himself belonging to the Church of Scotland - suggested the final decision should be removed from Downing Street, the convention has been that the first name on the shortlist would be the one chosen. However, as recently as 1987, Margaret Thatcher made it clear that she would not appoint shortlisted Jim Thompson to the vacant see of Birmingham due to his perceived left-wing views.

The Church of England uncomfortably straddles the UK political system, inherently linked to the government as the state religion but with both politicians and electorate unwilling to explicitly and openly link the Bible and politics. This contrasts with the situation across the Atlantic, in which the separation of church and state is written into the US Constitution, but the day-to-day influence of the Bible on politics is more intense. Just as it is unthinkable to imagine an American political leader resigning because his Christianity is seen as incompatible with his role, so it is unimaginable to think of the American President not making a solemn oath to serve his country on the Bible and uttering "So help me God."

CIVIL RIGHTS SERMONISERS

Martin Luther King was not the only minister with a leading role in the Civil Rights Movement

TJ JEMISON

CHURCH: MOUNT ZION FIRST BAPTIST

PLACE: BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

Two and a half years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, T J Jemison began an eight-day bus boycott in Baton Rouge. The trailblazing minister had failed to negotiate an end to segregation and set up a free-ride network that kept blacks away from the city's buses. Martin Luther King was quick to copy Jemison's tactics when the chance arose in Montgomery.

CHARLES KENZIE STEELE

CHURCH: BETHEL BAPTIST

PLACE: TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA

Aside from leading another city-wide bus boycott to end segregation on public transport, this time in Tallahassee, Steele was the lead plaintiff in a seven-year legal case that eventually led to the end of school segregation in Leon County, Florida. His influence led to him becoming the first vice-president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under Martin Luther King.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, SR.

CHURCH: EBENEZER BAPTIST

PLACE: ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Less well-known than his son, the older MLK's attitude to racial segregation was hugely influential on Martin Junior. He was committed to the Civil Rights Movement that his son led, becoming head of the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP and a campaigner for desegregation in Georgia. His later life saw him held hostage by student protesters, one of whom was a young Samuel L Jackson.

COURTING CONTROVERSY

Problems arose when different interpretations claimed to be authoritative

Words by Derek Wilson

No Christians doubted that the Bible was the authoritative word of God, but it is a complex and difficult collection of writings from several ages and cultures. To be a guide to faith, worship and ethics, it always needed to be interpreted. Who should do the interpreting?

As Christianity became the official religion among the diverse people of Europe, and the Church developed into a powerful institution in partnership with secular authorities, the concept of 'progressive revelation' became the foundation for Christian teaching: the Bible was not God's last word. He continued to speak through the leaders of the Church and particularly, after the Great Schism of 1054 between the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox communions, through the pope. The body of doctrine came to be formed by the interaction of the written word and reflection on it by Christian scholars. To the hierarchy, it was inconceivable that Bible and Church (which meant the professionals) could be at variance. But there were always those who disagreed.

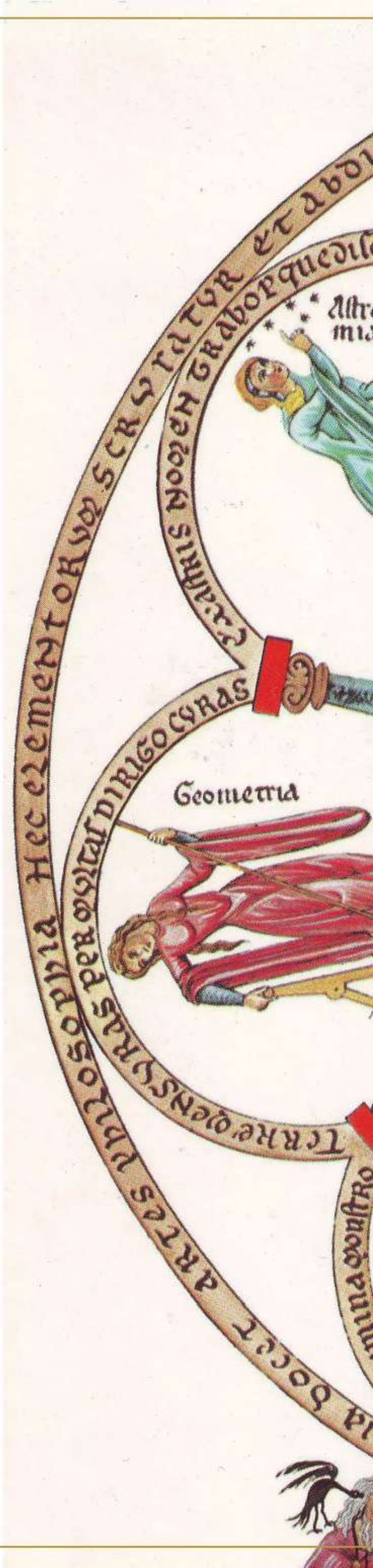
SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATION

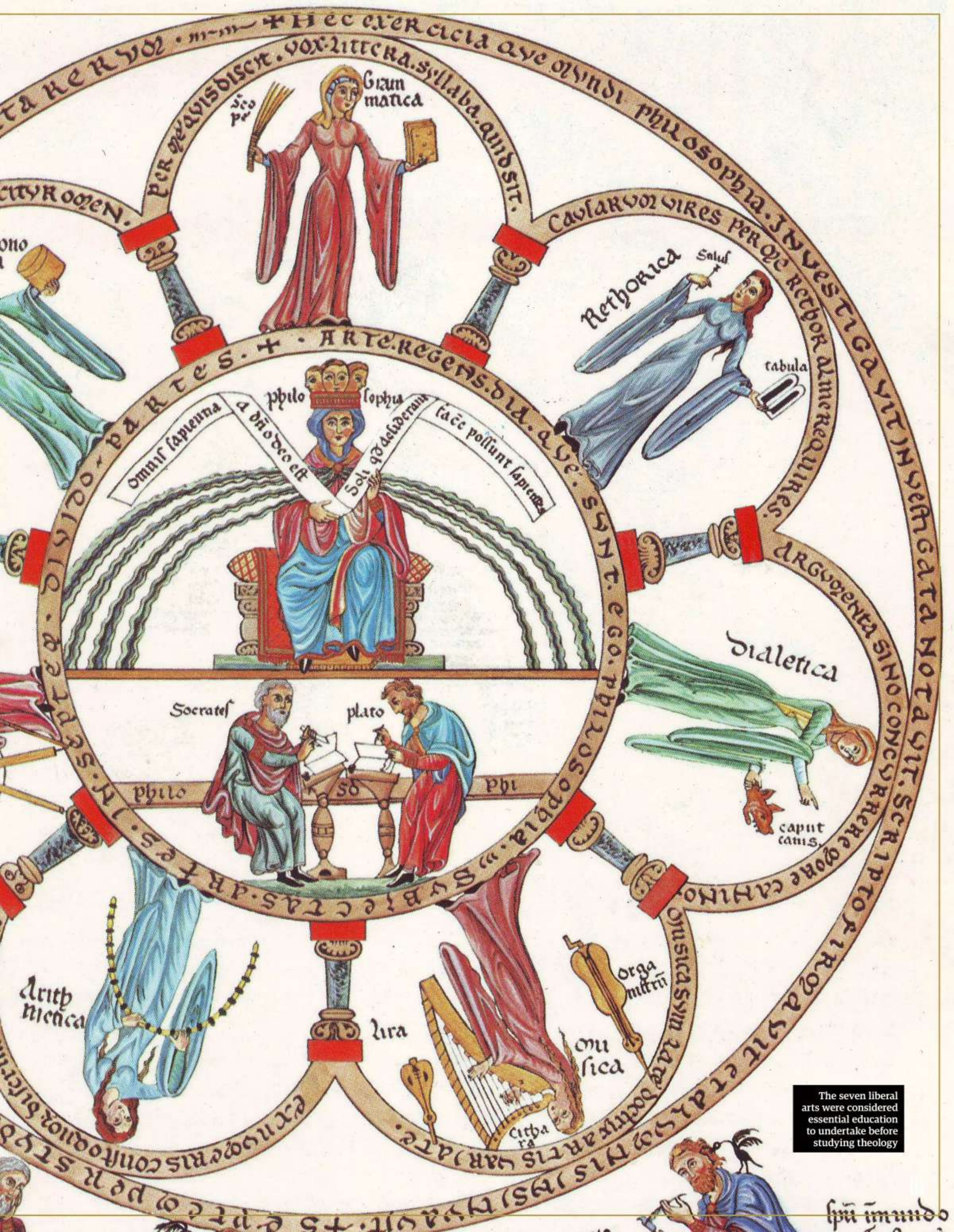
In the Roman and post-Roman world, various Churches differed in their acceptance of those books they considered to be inspired. In the West, the canon was finally fixed by Saint Jerome when, having consulted the best ancient texts available, he produced the Latin translation known as the Vulgate. This became the basis of all doctrine in Catholic churches - those that acknowledged the authority of the pope. In effect, this was only of importance to the educated minority, those who understood Latin, which excluded virtually all lay people and most clergy. Only those who studied theology at the universities actually handled the Bible and thus for centuries interpretation was in the hands of scholars.

The system of study that was involved in the universities is called 'scholasticism', which attempted to establish truth in two ways. One was the application of logic as developed by the great thinkers of classical antiquity, particularly Aristotle and masters of the 3rd-century-CE Neoplatonic school. Students could not embark on the study of theology - the queen of the sciences - until they had undergone a six-year regime leading to the degree of Master of Arts. This included the seven liberal arts: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, grammar, logic and rhetoric. The academic syllabus relied heavily on disputation. Students would listen to and participate in debates between defenders of competing viewpoints in order to arrive at the truth concerning (sometimes abstruse) details of theology.

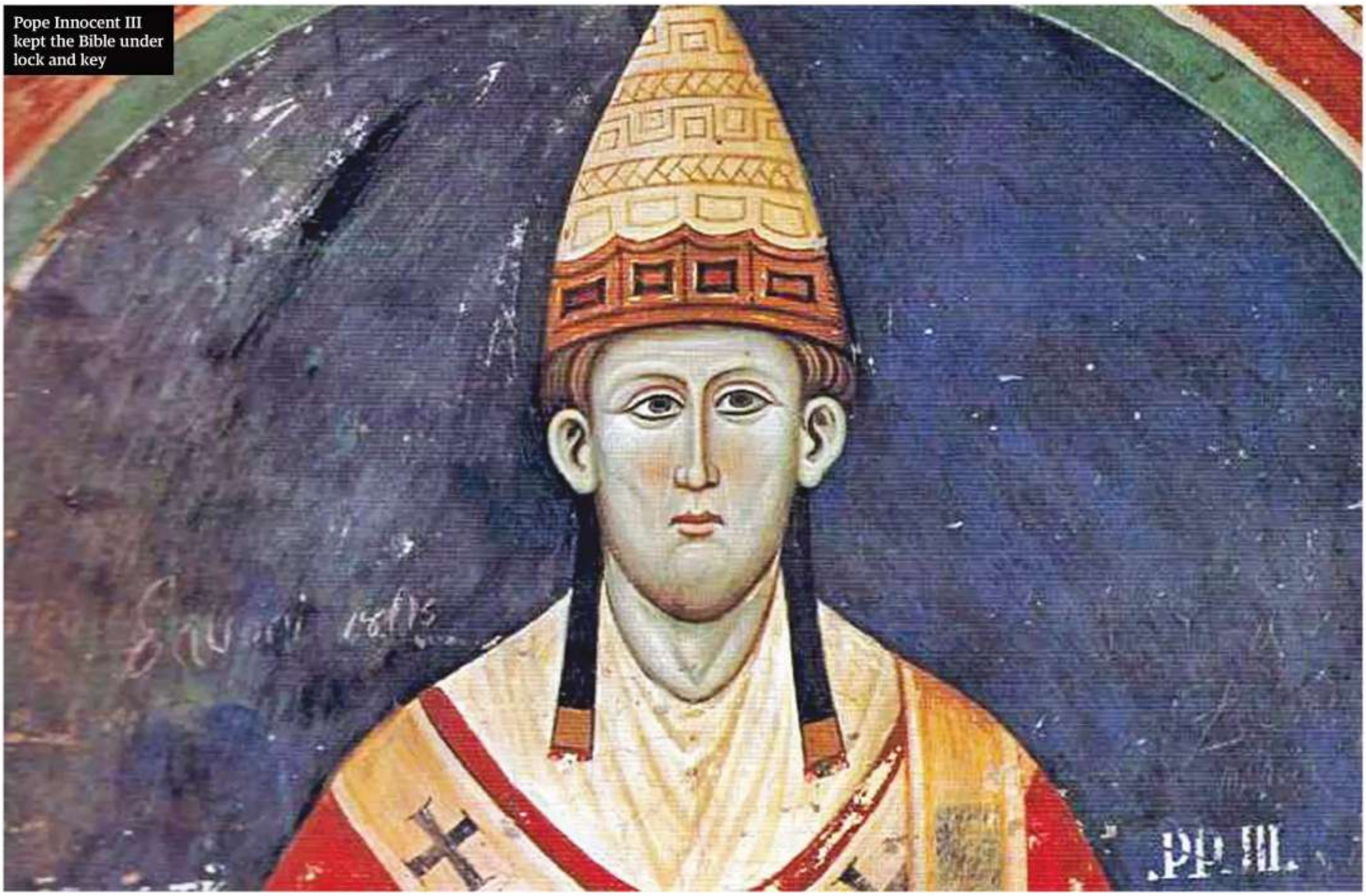
Side by side with this went the study of the great 'doctors' of the medieval Church. These were the acknowledged masters of the intellectual approach to divine truth such as Anselm of Canterbury, Duns Scotus, William of Occam and, above all, Thomas Aquinas, whose monumental *Summa Theologica* was regarded as the most complete and authoritative guide to all Christian truth.

This intensive, highly detailed regimen had at least four important consequences. It separated the 'experts', several of whom went on to become




HEC EXERCICIA QUE MUNDI PHILOSOPHIA INVESTIGAVIT INVESTIGATA NOTAVIT SCRIPTO FIRMAVIT
PER QUAM DISCIT. VOX. LITTERA. SYLLABA. QUID SIT.
CAUSARUM VIRES PER TE RETHOR ALME REQUIRES.
ARGUMENTA SINO CONCURRERE MORE CANINO
MUSICA SUM LATE DOCTRIX ARTIS VARIATE
ARTE REGENS DIA QUE SUNT EGO PHILOSOPHIA SUBIECTAS ARTES IN SEPTEM DIVIDO PARTES
Gram matica
Rethorica
Salus
tabula
Dialetica
caput canis
Arith metica
lira
orga nistrũ
mu sica
cithara
philo sophia
omnis sapientia a dño deo est
Soli quod desiderant facere possunt sapientes
Socrates
plato
philo so phi
spũ ĩmundo

The seven liberal arts were considered essential education to undertake before studying theology


Pope Innocent III kept the Bible under lock and key

bishops and other senior members of the religious establishment, from the vast majority of Church members. It tended to distance students from the Bible, since they could only approach the sacred text through several layers of scholarly interpretation. Most of them came to rely on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, a textbook that systematised official doctrine in four volumes of theology. It reverenced Jerome's Latin text, which was, after all, only a translation. Few, if any, Western scholars had access to early Greek and Hebrew documents, or would have been interested in them if they had. The Vulgate had become sacrosanct. Finally – and fundamentally – it treated the Christian faith as something to be known, rather than lived.

BUTTRESSING CONVICTIONS WITH SCRIPTURE

In 1215, Pope Innocent III explained the reason for keeping the Bible under lock and key: "The secret mysteries of the faith ought not... to be explained to all men in all places... For such is the depth of divine Scripture, that not only the simple and illiterate but even the prudent and learned are not fully sufficient to try to understand it."

The main reason why the ecclesiastical establishment discouraged and, in some cases, banned Bible translation was the fear of heresy. The word 'heresy' comes from a Greek original meaning 'choice'. If people who had not been through rigorous scholastic training were able to read the basic Christian text in their own language, they might choose to interpret it in unorthodox ways. This could lead them to challenge the 'experts'. Innocent was quite right – up to a point. The Bible is complex and, from the earliest times, there have been heretics who have 'chosen' interpretations at variance with official teaching.

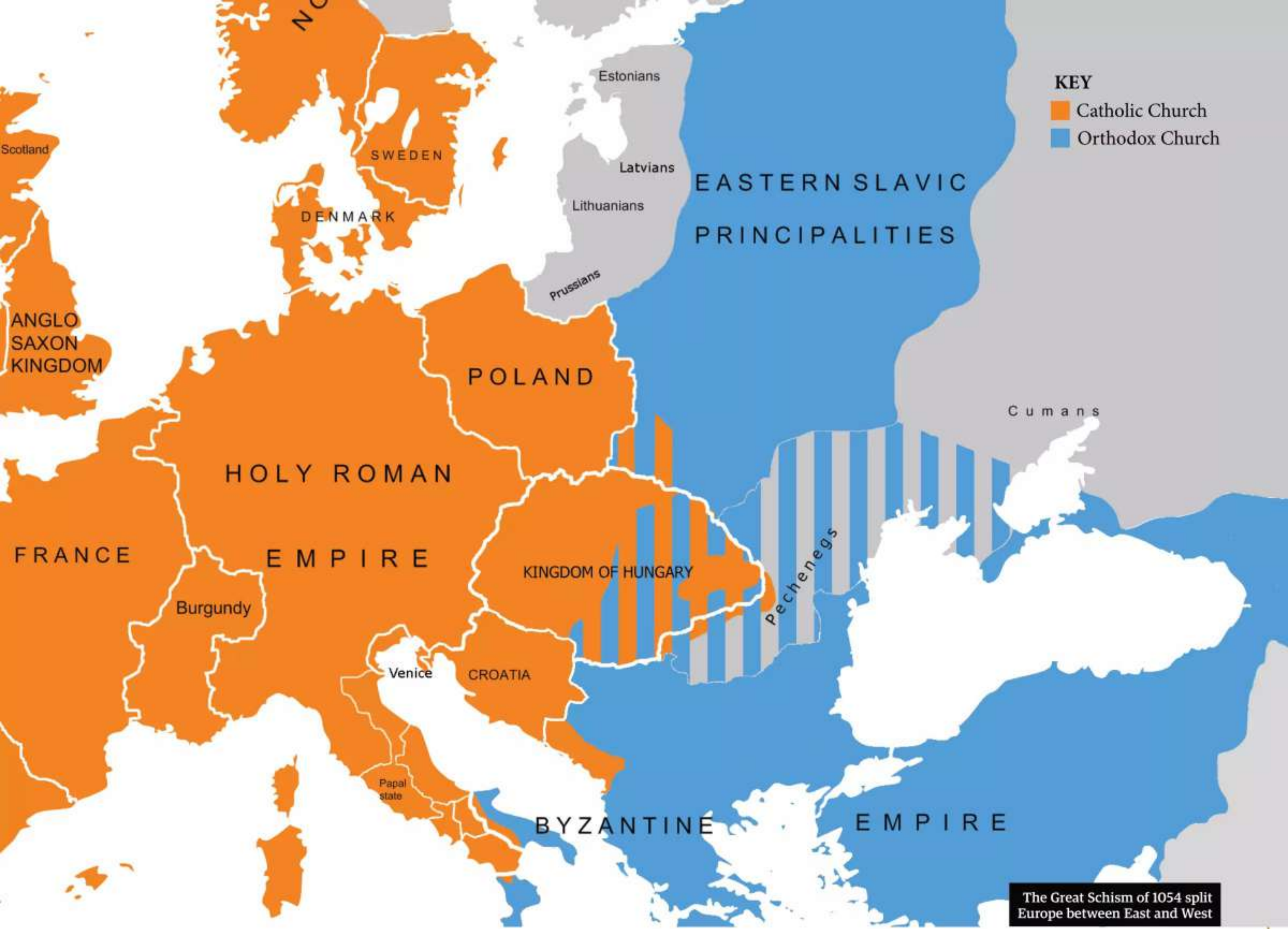
Most of the medieval radical groups evolved their own theologies out of a desire to deepen their spiritual lives – they wanted to read the Bible for themselves and not have its message 'filtered' by the clergy. In the 12th century, Peter Waldo was probably (much of what we know of him is based on legend) a well-to-do merchant of Lyon who, after a spiritual experience, resolved to renounce his wealth and lead a life more in keeping with Jesus' teachings.

Waldo commissioned scholars to produce a vernacular translation of the New Testament. From this, he deduced that certain doctrines lacked scriptural warrant. He rejected the mediatory function of the clergy on the grounds that Christ is the only intermediary between the Christian and God. Waldo also refused to believe the doctrine of purgatory – an intermediary state of the soul between death and final judgment. He taught that how people live now determines their eternal destiny. True disciples of Jesus should seek perfection now, and this involved embracing poverty and proclaiming salvation to the poor. Waldo believed that lay people were authorised to preach just as much as monks, friars and parish clergy. Hundreds of people were moved by this teaching and Waldensianism became a recognised heresy. Its members were condemned by Rome and most of them sought refuge in the mountainous terrain of southern France and northwestern Italy.

CONTROVERSY FED BY POLITICAL CONFLICT

By the 13th century there was scarcely anywhere in Europe where people, eager to read the Bible for themselves, could not locate a clandestine vernacular copy at least of the gospels or the psalms as aids to worship and contemplation. But the Church establishment, supposedly representing the Kingdom of Heaven, was intricately involved with the kings of this world, and Bible-based controversy was often fed by political conflict.

Soon after Waldo's death, another heresy was taking root in Lombardy. Its founder was Ugo Speroni, a lawyer – in many countries it was members of the legal profession who tended to


KEY
🟧 Catholic Church
🟦 Orthodox Church
Scotland
SWEDEN
DENMARK
Estonians
Latvians
Lithuanians
Prussians
EASTERN SLAVIC PRINCIPALITIES
ANGLO SAXON KINGDOM
POLAND
Cumans
HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE
FRANCE
Burgundy
KINGDOM OF HUNGARY
Pechenegs
Venice
CROATIA
Papal state
BYZANTINE EMPIRE

The Great Schism of 1054 split Europe between East and West

NEW BIBLES FOR OLD

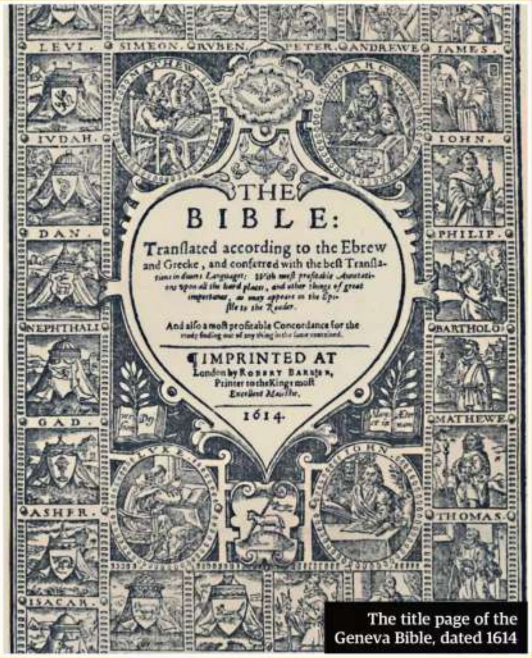
Eight English Bibles appeared in the 16th century

The Catholic Church's belief was that vernacular Bibles would lead to the proliferation of all manner of heresies, but demand proved irrepressible. When William Tyndale's first English New Testament was printed in 1526 and smuggled into England, it sold rapidly despite the dire penalties imposed on anyone possessing copies. 11 years later, a complete Bible appeared under the name of 'Thomas Matthew' - a pseudonym for its editor, who remained anonymous because the new work was Tyndale's text completed by other scholars. Another translation had already appeared, this time approved by Henry VIII; having displaced the pope as head of the English Church, he gave permission for a version completed in 1535 by Miles Coverdale, a Catholic friar turned Protestant.

However, there was still no licensed Bible for use in churches and reform-minded activists, led by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, the king's chief minister, pressed for an approved version. Despite the opposition of conservative bishops, the Great Bible appeared in 1539. But such was its disturbing impact that in 1543 Henry had second thoughts and caused an Act of parliament to be passed severely limiting the people permitted to read it.

During the reign of Catholic Mary Tudor, English Bibles went back into hiding as the Latin mass was reintroduced. Attention now switches to Geneva, where exiles from the Marian regime began work on the most innovative version yet. The Geneva Bible, a revision of the Great Bible, contained maps and pictures while, for the first time, dividing the text into chapters and verses. It remained popular in England after Elizabeth I's accession, but not with the queen herself - it was too Protestant for her taste. She had her prelates produce yet another text, the Bishops' Bible, shorn of many of its Protestant annotations.

Months after James I's accession in 1603, he ordered an official replacement, the King James Version of 1611. Reluctantly, Catholic scholars on the continent issued the Rheims-Douai version of 1582-1603. Did this mean that Rome no longer feared the heretical influence of vernacular Scripture? No, like each of the other Bibles, theirs was partisan and had points to prove.


THE
BIBLE:
Tranſlated according to the Ebrew
and Greeke, and conferred with the beſt Tranſla-
tions in diuers Languages: With moſt profitable Annotati-
ons vpon all the hard places, and other things of great
importance, as may appeare in the Epi-
ſtle to the Reader.

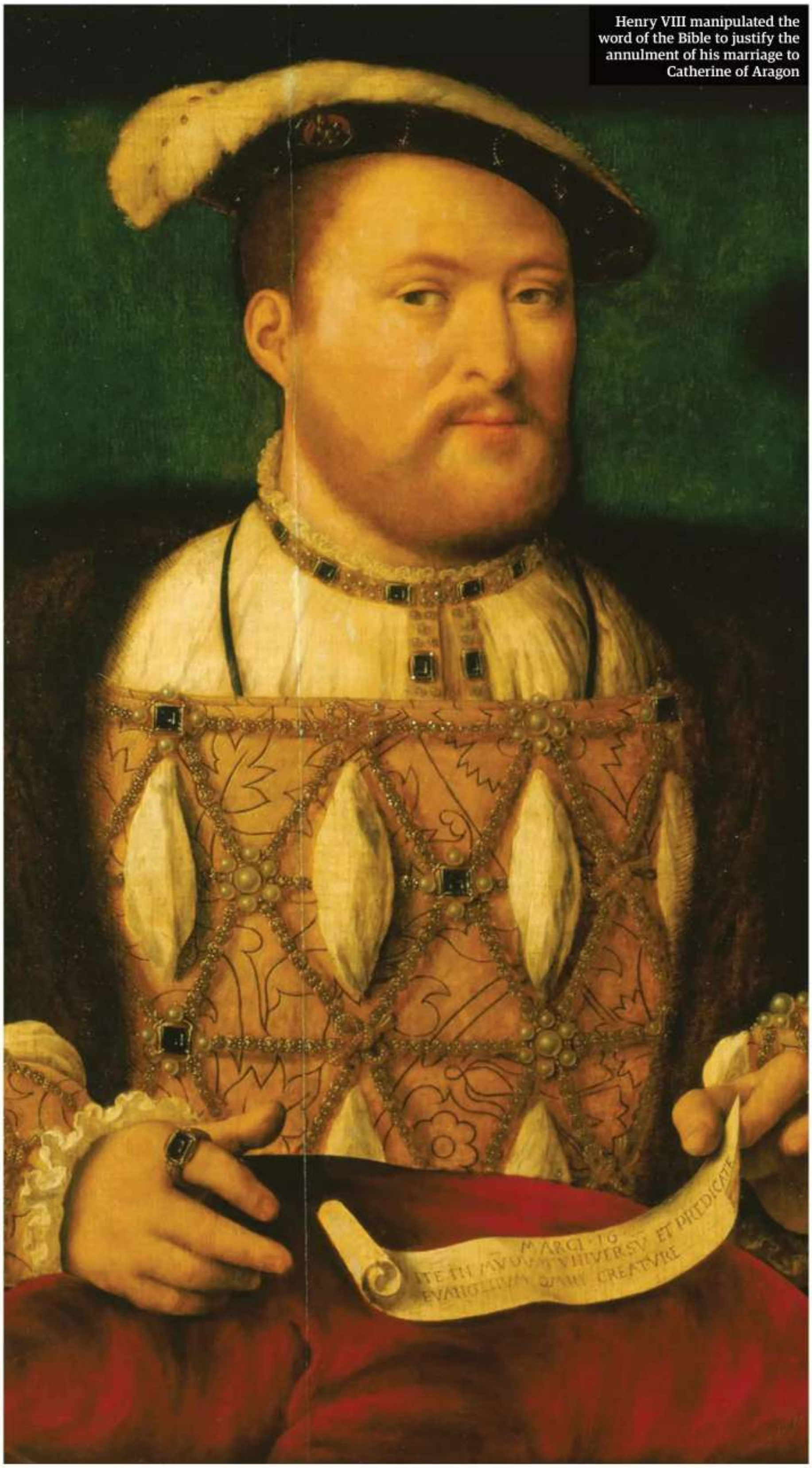
And alſo a moſt profitable Concordance for the
ready finding out of any thing in the ſame contained.

¶IMPRINTED AT
London by Robert Barker,
Printer to the Kings moſt
Excellent Maieſtie.

1614.

LEVI.
SIMEON.
RVBEN.
PETER.
ANDREWE.
IAMES.
MATHEW
MARC
IVDAH.
IOHN.
DAN.
PHILIP.
NEPHTHALI
BARTHOLO
GAD.
MATHEWE
LVKE
IOHN
ASHER.
THOMAS.
ISACAR.

The title page of the Geneva Bible, dated 1614


MARCI 16
ITE IN MVNDVM VNIVERSV ET PREDICATE
EVANGELIVM OMNI CREATVRE

Henry VIII manipulated the word of the Bible to justify the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon

clash most frequently with Church authorities because civil and ecclesiastical law overlapped. Men in holy orders were not subject to the civil courts but had to be handed over to the canon law officers where, if found guilty, they frequently (according to popular opinion) 'got off lightly' with a penance. Religious institutions were also major landowners and clashes over territorial rights often led to confrontations between the guardians of the two systems of law.

Speroni searched the Scriptures for an endorsement of a priestly caste that enjoyed wealth and privilege, and proclaimed moral standards that its members often failed to exemplify. He didn't find it. His denunciation of the ecclesiastical system was absolute: priesthood, sacraments, worship of 'idolatrous' images, fasts and pilgrimages - all were consigned to the dustbin. For him and his followers, all that was necessary was an interiorised religion, lived in the power of the Holy Spirit and in personal union with Jesus.

Speroni's heresy was the most far-reaching of all the pre-Reformation, Bible-based revolutions against the Catholic establishment. While it didn't last long, its importance lies not in its failure, but in its embrace of all the elements of protest that manifested themselves later. For example, in 1395, the leaders of the English heretical community known as the Lollards set out in *The Twelve Conclusions* their objections to the state of the Catholic Church. Ten of the points they raised were identical with the criticisms that Speroni had made over two centuries earlier.

TINKERING WITH THE TEXT

By the dawn of the 16th century, more translations - some clandestine, others at least grudgingly approved - had appeared. The Lollards had produced their own version, as had the Hussite heretics of Bohemia. Scholars were also taking a fresh interest in the Bible because early documents were reaching the West as the Ottoman Turks overran Constantinople and other centres of learning in the Byzantine Empire.

Although official commitment to the Vulgate was as firm as ever, progressive churchmen realised that the opportunity now existed to use it in conjunction with the newly available sources to make accurate vernacular versions. A really accurate approved modern text, they agreed, would satisfy a demand that was growing as education reached more people. It would also shoulder aside the unofficial versions with their heretical running commentaries. Unfortunately, the new scholarly endeavour did not turn out to be trouble-free.

The Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus was a pioneer of the new approach, and it plunged him into controversy. He began by producing a fresh Greek New Testament, based on the most reliable original texts he was able to consult accompanied by a new Latin translation in 1516. Inevitably, Erasmus' text varied at some points with the Vulgate and, therefore, appeared to be correcting the 'infallible' foundation document on which the

Church had based its doctrine for well over 1,000 years. Reactionaries were furious.

What particularly roused their ire was Erasmus' omission of words that appeared in the First Epistle of John. In modern English they read as follows: "There are three that bear witness in heaven - the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit and these three are one" (1 John 5:7). This is known as the Comma Johanneum - the word 'comma' in Greek meant a phrase - and its importance to medieval theology lay in the fact that it was the only concise, clear-cut reference to the Holy Trinity in the Bible: three persons in one Godhead.

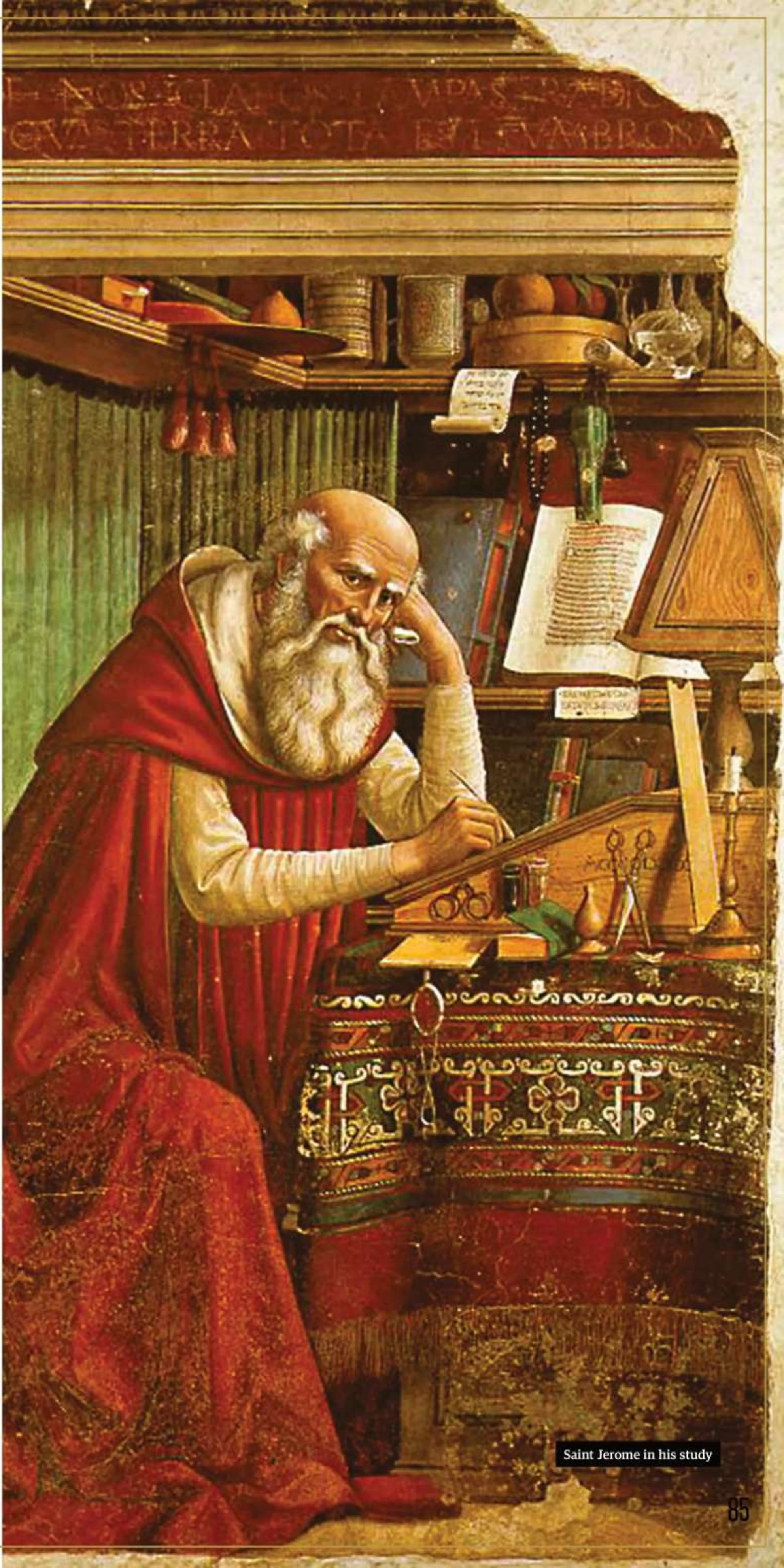
Erasmus left it out because he could not find it in any early Greek text. In fact, it had started life as a Latin gloss (annotation) in the 4th century and had gradually found its way into the body of the text, copied by generations of scribes over the next millennium. As late as the 15th century, the Comma found its way back from the Vulgate into a Greek manuscript, whose genuineness Erasmus doubted. He suspected that there had been tinkering with the text; someone in some monastic scriptorium had put the affirmation of the Trinity into the Bible because it ought to be in the Bible.

There was a storm of protest and this endangered the acceptance of Erasmus' book. For that reason he reinstated the Comma in the third edition in 1522, although he was still sceptical of its authenticity. For his part, Erasmus was outraged by the 'closed shop' attitude of the scholastic theologians who behaved as though "Christ taught such intricate doctrine that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians or as though the strength of the Christian religion consisted in man's ignorance of it". The scholar need not have worried about his reputation as his Novum Testamentum became the text used by a new generation of scholars such as Martin Luther and William Tyndale in making new vernacular translations - an undertaking that was close to the Dutchman's heart.

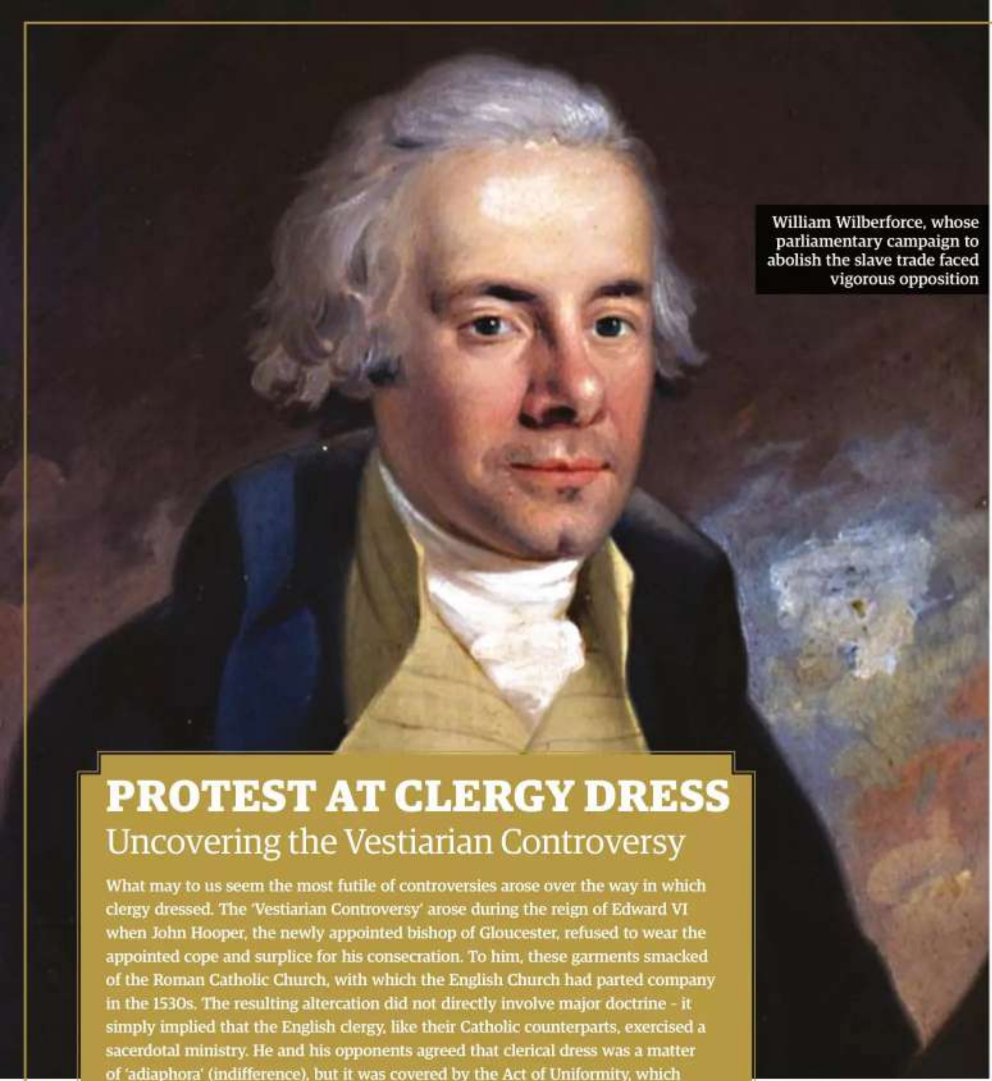
IN PURSUIT OF PERSONAL GOALS

There have been many examples throughout history of individuals or groups who have turned to Scripture in pursuit of their personal goals. This might involve cynical, false interpretations of biblical references taken out of context to give apparent divine sanction to their actions. But more often, the one who is quoting the Bible is convinced (or has convinced himself) that the word of God really does sanction his belief or his proposed course of action.

When William Wilberforce launched his long-running parliamentary campaign against the slave trade in the late 1700s, he was vigorously opposed by businessmen - some sincere Christians - who pointed out that nowhere in the Bible was slavery condemned. Such reasoning conveniently ignored the freeing of God's people, the Israelites, from servitude in Egypt and, later, Babylon. More importantly, the New Testament narrative spoke of God's chosen people as a community in which "there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles,



Saint Jerome in his study



William Wilberforce, whose parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade faced vigorous opposition

slaves and free men, male and female: all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This implied dignity and respect for all human beings, but the slave trade saw plantation workers in the British colonies, as well as the men and women shackled together in British ships for transport across the Atlantic, living lives based on brutality and they were treated as less than animals.

It is often said, 'You can prove anything from the Bible'. That is certainly true, but only if you wrench words out of context in both religious and historical senses. The anti-abolitionists failed not only to realise that God made man in his own image - and therefore worthy of respect - but also to see that 'slavery' is not the same thing at all times and in all places. For example, in the Roman world occupied by Jesus and St Paul, many slaves occupied positions of importance and responsibility in the state as well as in people's private households.

One of the most notorious examples of Bible misuse was provided by Henry VIII. The year was 1527 and he was in a quandary - 18 years earlier, God had entrusted to him the governance of England. It was a realm his father, Henry VII, had rescued from years of conflict between the rival Houses of Lancaster and York. The old king had fought hard to establish his own family on the throne and defend it from potential rivals. He had groomed his first son, Arthur, to succeed him and provided him with a glamorous Spanish bride. Although there had been a setback when Arthur died, all was not lost because Henry VII had another son. In 1509, young Henry VIII had

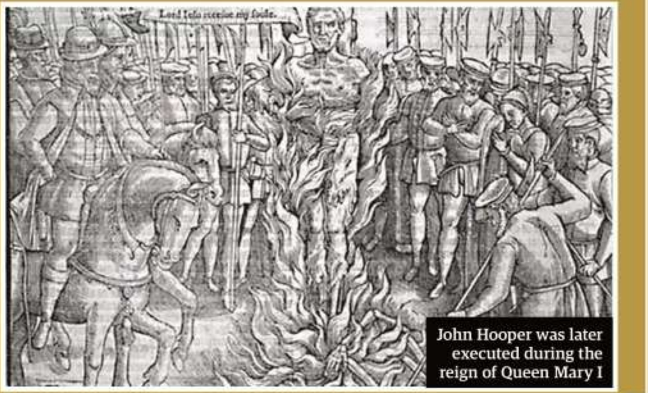
PROTEST AT CLERGY DRESS

Uncovering the Vestiarian Controversy

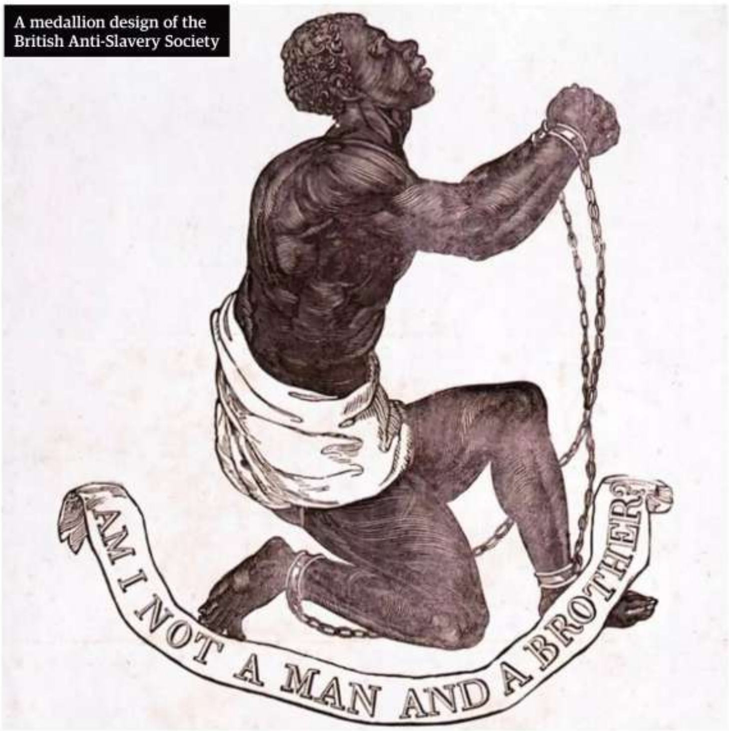
What may to us seem the most futile of controversies arose over the way in which clergy dressed. The 'Vestiarian Controversy' arose during the reign of Edward VI when John Hooper, the newly appointed bishop of Gloucester, refused to wear the appointed cope and surplice for his consecration. To him, these garments smacked of the Roman Catholic Church, with which the English Church had parted company in the 1530s. The resulting altercation did not directly involve major doctrine - it simply implied that the English clergy, like their Catholic counterparts, exercised a sacerdotal ministry. He and his opponents agreed that clerical dress was a matter of 'adiaphora' (indifference), but it was covered by the Act of Uniformity, which required clergy to wear the appointed uniform.

Hooper claimed that, as a matter of conscience, he should not be forced to comply. He based his argument on 1 Corinthians 8, in which Paul had explained that Christians should not eat meat offered to idols because, although the idols represented deities who did not exist, being associated with them might send out the wrong signals. Hooper was concerned that if Protestant ministers dressed like Catholic priests, people might think there was no difference. Only after a few weeks in the Fleet prison did Hooper give in.

But the problem did not go away. In 1566, 37 London ministers were suspended from office for refusing to wear the surplice and a few diehards were permanently debarred. As the years passed, positions hardened. The Puritan party emerged in the Church of England, whose members insisted that the beliefs and practices of the Church should mirror precisely those of the New Testament communities, whose leaders did not wear special clothes.


Lord Iesu receive my soule.

John Hooper was later executed during the reign of Queen Mary I


AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?

A medallion design of the British Anti-Slavery Society stepped up to the plate, taking his brother's position - and his widow. All was set fair for the dynasty. But by 1527, everything had gone wrong; the royal couple had no male heir and Queen Catherine was past childbearing age. The dynasty was at an end and there was nothing Henry VIII could do about it.

> “OTHERS PROTESTED THAT HENRY'S TACTICS WERE A CYNICAL PLOY WITH ONE OBJECTIVE”

TO SUIT THE KING

Church law was quite clear about the indissolubility of marriage except under very specific circumstances, and Queen Catherine was determined not to stand aside in order to leave her husband free to remarry. The continuation of the Tudor line depended on the birth of a male heir about whose legitimacy there could be no doubt. Henry was trapped... unless it could be shown that he and Catherine had never been lawfully married.

Back in 1509, the pope had issued a dispensation permitting Henry to marry his sister-in-law, but what if it could be shown that His Holiness had exceeded his authority? Were there some matters that lay outside the competence even of Christ's vicar? Was there in fact a higher authority than the pope? The answer was, 'Yes, God's written word.'

At some stage, the king discovered a verse in the Old Testament book of Leviticus (20:21): "If a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless." To Henry, this seemed to be the answer he was desperately looking for. His marriage to Catherine had been a breach of God's law and not even the pope could sanction it. This explained why he had no living sons: the childlessness promised in the Bible had followed inexorably on his sinful act. He ignored the fact that he and Catherine were not 'childless'; they had a healthy daughter, Mary. There was also the, apparently contradictory, mandate of another biblical verse. Deuteronomy 25:5 stated that, in the event of a man dying without heir, it was his brother's duty to marry the widow in order to provide a child that would inherit the dead man's property.

The apparent contradiction gave theologians plenty to get their teeth into and Henry sent agents travelling for and wide to gather the opinions of eminent scholars. Those opinions varied. While some agreed that Leviticus invalidated the marriage of Henry and Catherine, others protested that Henry's tactics were a cynical ploy with one objective - Scripture had to be made to suit the king's needs. The course of what became known as 'the King's Great Matter' is well known. It dragged on for years, led to a breach between Henry and the pope, and ultimately contributed to the English Reformation.

CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT

This well-known case illustrates the care that always has to be taken when applying the words of the uniquely multilayered religious handbook that is the Bible. Words cannot always be plucked out, taken at face value, and then applied at any time and in any situation. Having said that, however, many statements are, without date, timelessly valid for believers: "God is love" (1 John 4:8); "[Christ] was buried and raised to life three days later" (1 Corinthians 15:4); "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:31), and so on.

In seeking to understand other passages, the golden rule has to be 'context, context, context'. Particularly in the Old Testament, the reader is presented with a historical narrative describing how God's uniquely chosen people had to work out the application of eternal principles in ever-changing circumstances. Thus, for example, the Leviticus and Deuteronomy passages that featured in the Henry VIII divorce case related to matrimony, sexual relations and inheritance at a time when the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, cease their nomadic wanderings and become a settled people distinct from their neighbours. Adultery was forbidden, as was intermarriage with other tribes. But it was important for family land holdings to be kept together, which is why an exception had to be made in the event of a man dying without children to inherit his property.

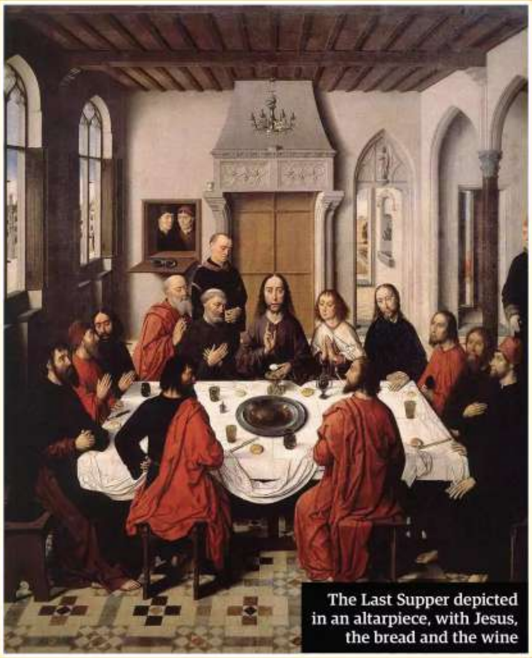
FLESH AND BLOOD OR BREAD AND WINE?

The longest-running dispute concerned what happened in the Communion service

According to the gospels of Matthew and Mark and 1 Corinthians, Jesus gave bread and wine to his inner core of disciples at the Last Supper with the words, "This is my body given for you" and "This is my blood shed for you". This became the central act of worship in the Church, known variously as the Holy Communion or Eucharist. It also became the most controversial aspect of Church life over many centuries. What did Christ actually mean by the words of institution? Was he speaking figuratively, instructing his followers to regard bread and wine as symbolising his death, or did he intend his words to be taken literally, signifying an actual change in the elements?

By the 12th century, despite ongoing debate among scholars, official Church teaching had opted for the latter, fundamentalist opinion. In the next century, Thomas Aquinas used Aristotelian logic to explain how bread and wine could be changed without appearing to do so. He drew a distinction between the accidents, or external reality - shape, size, colour, smell, taste by which we recognise things - and their substance, or the inner reality or essence. For example, chairs come in all sizes, shapes and materials, which are their accidents, but they all share their 'chairness' and that is their substance.

The Catholic dogma (to depart from which was heresy) was that, through the act of priestly consecration, the substance of bread and wine was transformed but the accidents were not. This dogma had the effect of underpinning the sacredness of priesthood. In an age when most people believed in magic the priest became a 'holy magician'. Groups down the centuries denounced as heretics - Cathars, Waldensians, Lollards, Hussites, Speronists and all those that broke away at the Reformation - rejected both the power claimed by the Catholic priesthood and the theory of transubstantiation that validated it.



The Last Supper depicted in an altarpiece, with Jesus, the bread and the wine

WAGING WAR

Exactly why did a book preaching peace and love divide people against each other?

Words by Derek Wilson

Once the canon of scripture had been generally accepted in the Western Church it became a 'sacred text'. That is to say, this library of ancient writings was regarded as divinely inspired, authoritative and above contradiction. However, they remained documents written by different people at different times; documents that had been passed down from generation to generation, painstakingly hand copied over and over again in Greek and Hebrew. So, while the Bible was God-inspired it was also man-made. God cannot make mistakes. Men can – and do.

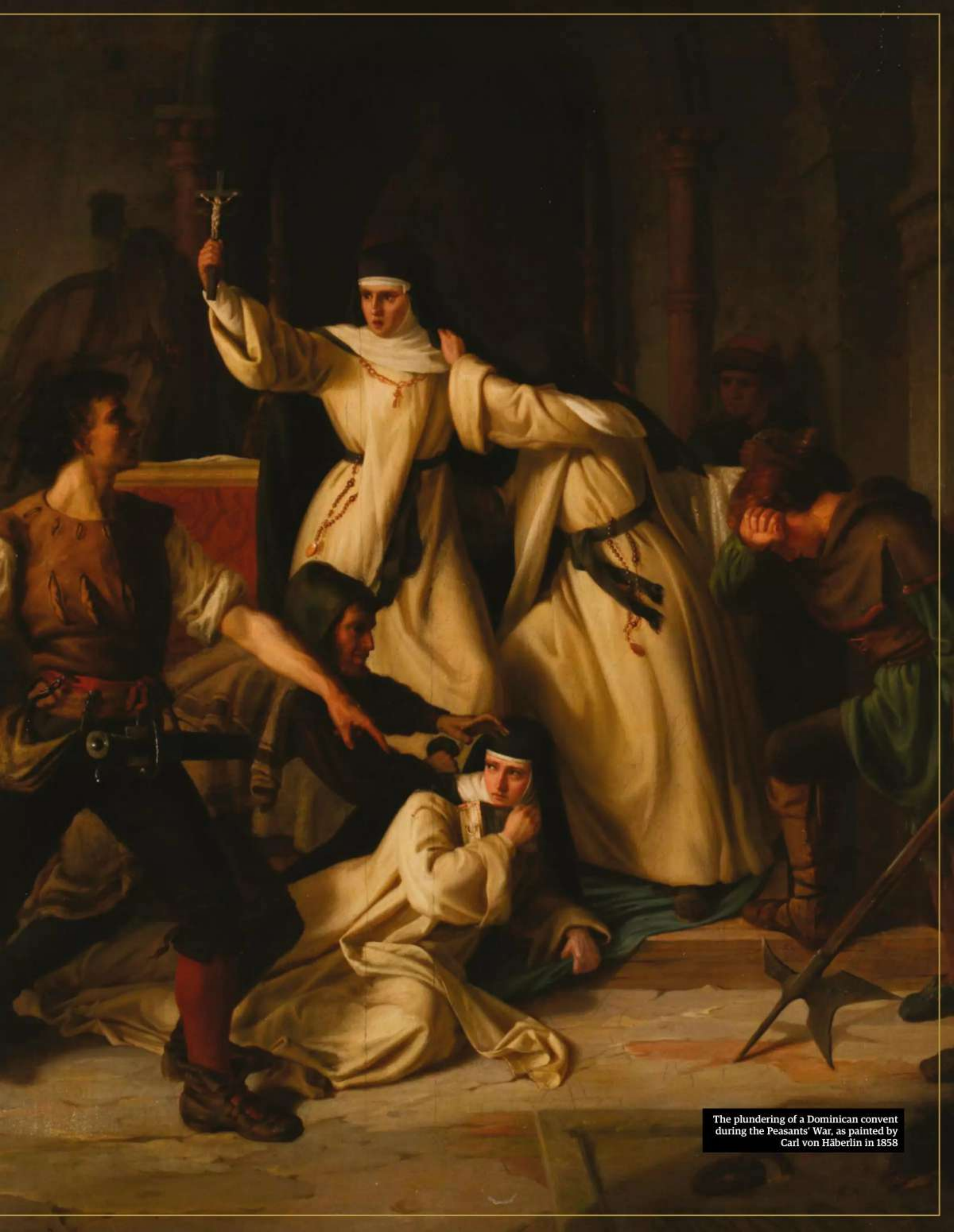
It was the scholar ascetic Jerome (347-420 CE) who, under pressure from Pope Damasus I produced the complete translation of the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate). He worked thoroughly, travelling widely and consulting the most reliable texts he could find. Not only did he seek out, in various monasteries and libraries, the earliest documents available, he also decided which of the many early Jewish and Christian texts used in different churches actually merited inclusion in the 'canon', the official Bible. Henceforth, the Catholic Church endorsed the Vulgate as the infallible text. Throughout the Middle Ages, generations of scholars based their theological studies and their definition of doctrine on this text.

However, one cause for concern was that, from time to time, early and/or better manuscripts came to light that varied in minor ways from Jerome's version. This became a serious issue after the Muslim conquest of the eastern Christian empire and the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Scholars fleeing from the enemy arrived in the West, bringing with them precious and rare manuscripts never seen in Europe before. This made a double impact on the scholarly world: it provided more texts for comparison with the Vulgate, and it inspired a more detailed study of the ancient languages in which the Bible was written. By this time the authority of the papacy had become inseparably bound up with the authority of the Vulgate. Anyone touting different interpretations was denounced as a heretic.

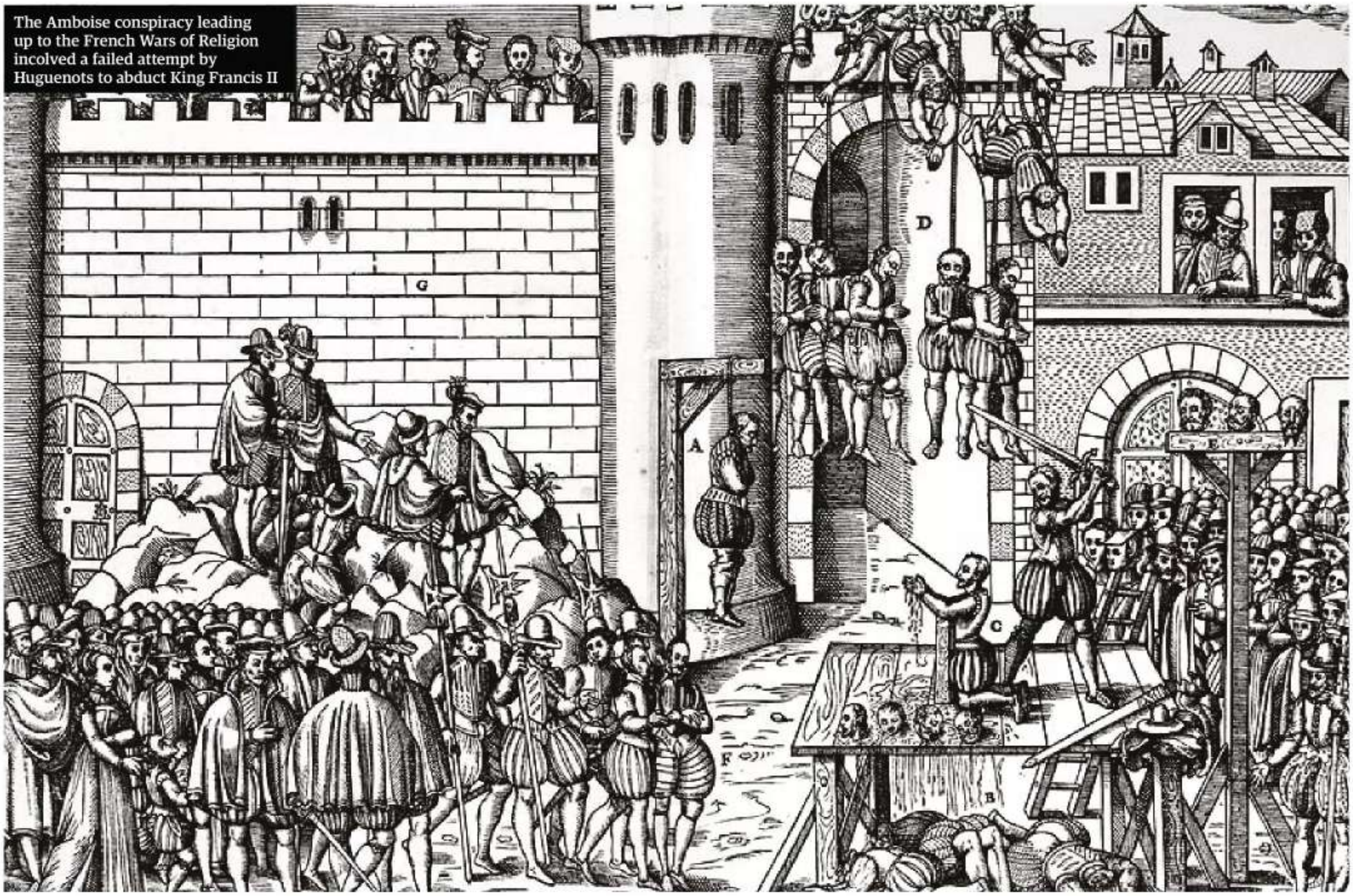
DEALING WITH DEVIANTS

The mention of the word 'heresy' obliges us to take a few steps backwards in time. The Church has always had heretics. The term itself comes from a Greek word meaning 'choice'. Heretics were people who had chosen, for their own reasons, to believe teachings at variance with what the authorities in Rome decreed. Those authorities had various ways of dealing with variants. They could impose acts of penance. They could isolate offenders in

"ANYONE TOUTING DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS WAS DENOUNCED AS A HERETIC"



The plundering of a Dominican convent during the Peasants' War, as painted by Carl von Häberlin in 1858



The Amboise conspiracy leading up to the French Wars of Religion incolved a failed attempt by Huguenots to abduct King Francis II

"IN EXTREME CASES, THEY CALLED KINGS AND THEIR SUBJECTS TO WAGE WAR AND EXTERMINATE THOSE UNDERMINING CHRISTIAN SOCIETY"

monasteries to prevent the spread of their ideas. They could hand over those convicted in church courts to the secular authorities to be imprisoned or executed. In extreme cases, when heretical movements had got out of hand, they called kings and their subjects to wage war and exterminate those undermining Christian society.

There were various reasons why religious enthusiasts opposed the Church hierarchy. Often heresy began with rejection of a church leadership that had become corrupt. Rebels complained that popes, bishops and even parish priests were more interested in power and wealth than in caring for the spiritual needs of the people. The critics saw themselves as reformers, preaching a gospel of simplicity and humility. This led some heretic groups to reject basic Christian doctrine. For example, the Cathars of North Italy and southern France evolved a dualistic theology in which the God of the Old Testament was evil and the God of the New Testament was good. The pope ordered a crusade against the Cathars and conflict existed from the mid-12th to the early 14th century. The more far-reaching Waldensian heresy, meanwhile, made no assault on basic doctrine but concentrated on church practices that enhanced the powers of the priesthood, such as confession and transubstantiation (the belief that the celebrant at mass could actually change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ).

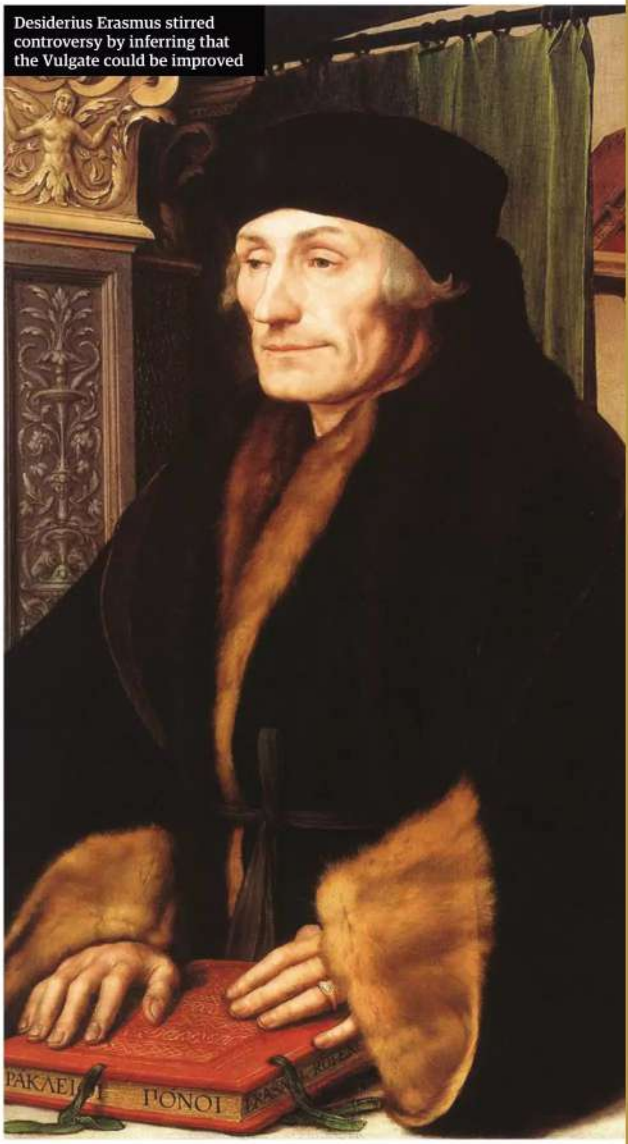
BIBLE VS CHURCH MOVEMENTS

However, these and other unorthodox movements did involve comparing and contrasting official doctrine and practice with the teaching of the Bible. For centuries the Catholic hierarchy relied upon the educational gap between clergy and laity. Few lay people could read Latin, the language of scholars and church officials, and not many were literate in their own vernacular languages. But the times were changing. Fifteenth-century heretical movements were claiming biblical support for their challenge of Catholic leadership and were sponsoring unauthorised translations.

In centres as far apart as Oxford and Prague, two Bible-based protest movements flagged up what would become a 'Bible versus Church' movement. The 14th-century Oxford professor, John Wycliffe (1330-84), launched a protest against the moral failings and political power of the clergy. As part of his campaign, he urged all literate English people to study the Bible for themselves so that they could see clearly the gap that had opened up between how their priests behaved and what the Christian foundation document actually said. To enable them to do this, he began to write an English translation of the Vulgate. The work was continued after his death by his followers, dubbed 'Lollards' by their enemies. This underground movement continued throughout the 15th century and well into the 1500s. English church leaders responded by banning all unauthorised translations and parliament passed one of the most draconian laws ever to appear on the statute book in De Heretico Comburendo, which labelled Lollardy as seditious and mandated death by burning for all convicted Lollards. In Prague, capital of Bohemia, Jan Huss (1369-1415), rector of the university, took up Wycliffe's teaching and campaigned for the use of the Czech language for the Bible and all church services. Hus was summoned to a church council in Constance (1415) to discuss his views, under the promise of a safe conduct. Once there, he was charged with heresy and burned at the stake. This sparked off the Hussite Wars (1419-34). Although the Hussites were split into rival camps by the conflict, their basic beliefs spread rapidly through Bohemia and neighbouring lands over the next two centuries.

STUDYING THE SACRED TEXT

By the early 16th century it was not only religious radicals who were proclaiming a 'back to the Bible' message. Scholars across Europe were bringing open minds to the study of the sacred text. The Renaissance encouraged the growing interest in the study of Greek and Hebrew. In 1516 the leading philosopher of the age, Desiderius Erasmus, grasped the nettle of the Vulgate. His Novum Instrumentum presented the Greek New Testament according to the best available texts, together with a new Latin translation. What was shocking about this to traditionalists was the suggestion that St Jerome's text could be improved on - that it contained errors. Erasmus did not shrink from pointing out what some of those errors were. For example, the Greek word 'metanoeite' had been rendered into Latin as poenitentiam agite, 'do penance'. This meant 'perform the rituals prescribed by the Church for obtaining restitution'. Erasmus pointed out that the sense of the Greek was 'repent', experience an inner change - something much more personal and not requiring priestly intermediaries. Erasmus went even further; he called for vernacular translations of scripture and declared, quite openly, that he believed the sacred text should be available for every literate man or women to read. Within a decade, scholars in



Desiderius Erasmus stirred controversy by inferring that the Vulgate could be improved

A DISSENTING MANIFESTO

In 1395, the Wycliffites, or Lollards, a disparate movement of English biblicists, published, by means of placards nailed to church doors, their complaints about the religious establishment. Their *Twelve Conclusions* stated:

1 The church has become too involved in worldly politics.

2 Priestly ordination has no biblical warrant.

3 Clerical celibacy encourages the sin of sodomy.

4 The doctrine of transubstantiation encourages the worship of material objects.

5 Clerical exorcism and hallowing is a form of witchcraft.

6 High-ranking churchmen should not also be senior officers of state.

7 Specific prayers for dead individuals discriminate against the rest of the blessed departed and demanding payment for such prayers amounts to bribery and corruption.

8 Pilgrimages and veneration of relics are both ineffectual and idolatrous.

9 Priestly confession and absolution usurp the authority held by God alone.

10 Because Christians are called to demonstrate love and forgiveness they should not engage in warfare. Wars waged with religious justification (ie crusades) are especially blasphemous.

11 Vows of female celibacy encourage covert sexual activity and abortion.

12 Too much attention is given to expressing religious devotion through the creation of beautiful objects instead of practising godliness.

A contemporary illustration depicting the Peasants' War

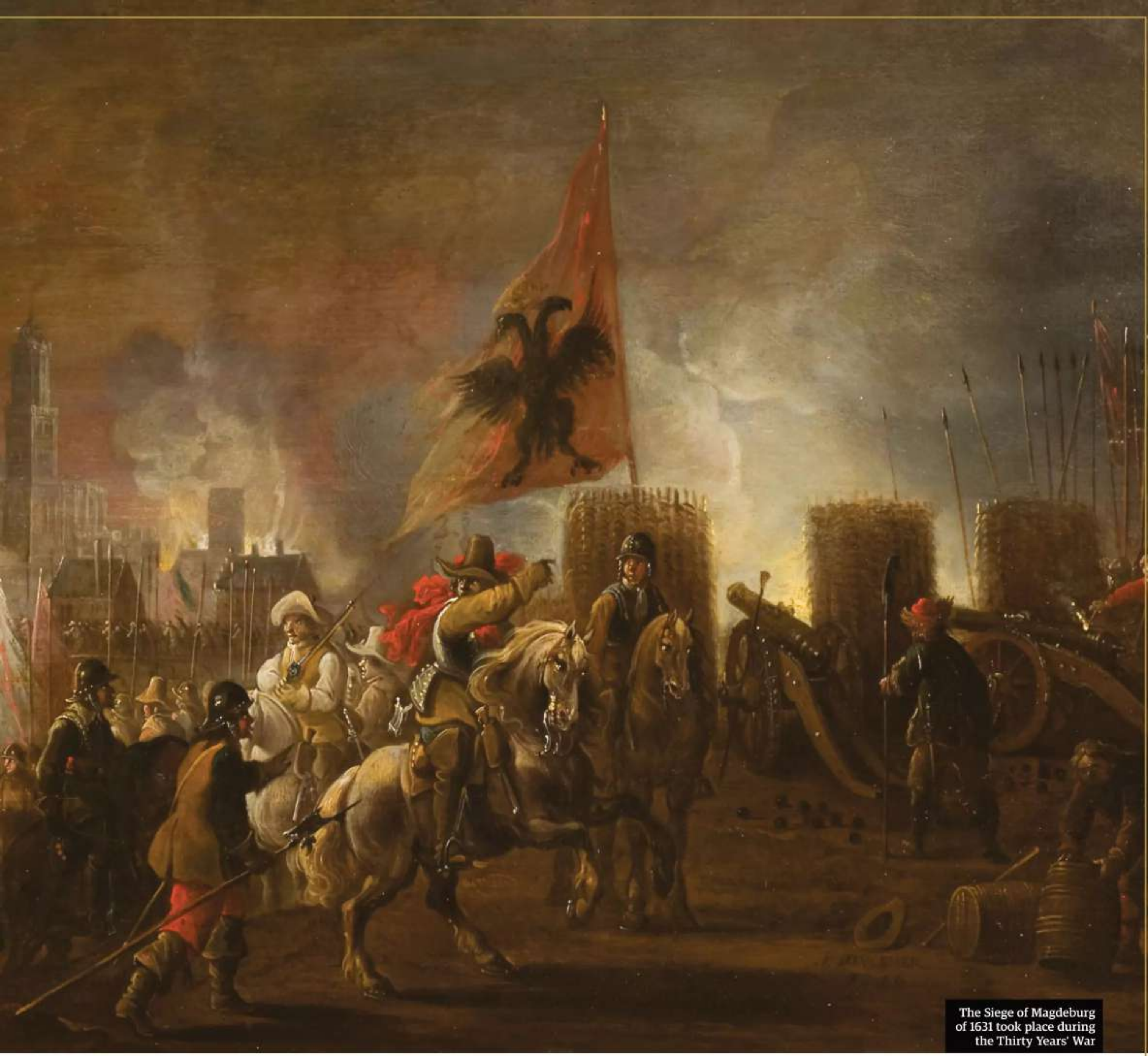
"THE WORD OF GOD IN THE COMMON TONGUE WAS AN INTELLECTUAL INTOXICANT"

various countries were turning Erasmus's dream into reality by producing Bibles that educated people in Germany, England, France and elsewhere could read for themselves. This was the biggest single factor that changed the religious and social life of the continent. It released a new kind of individualism: if ordinary men and women were able to establish their own relationship with God simply by reading his written word, what might they discover therein about the nature of priesthood, kingship and law? To take just one example, Jesus taught his followers not to swear oaths to buttress the truth of what they said, "Just say 'yes' or 'no', he commented - 'anything else you say comes from the Evil One'" (Matthew 5, 33-7). But in 16th century Europe, all contractual relationships were based on the swearing of oaths. To refuse to reinforce a declaration of interest by invoking the name of God or specific saints was to opt out of society. Religious radicals who took this stance ran the risk of being tried for sedition.

SCRIPTURE'S SECRETS

The word of God in the common tongue was an intellectual intoxicant. It appeared at a time when the new invention of movable type printing was making books of all kinds available to a growing audience. Every major development in human communication - newspapers, telephone, radio, internet, etc - is an exciting event with incalculable consequences. So it was with printed books. They gave an explosive impetus to education. European societies rapidly became more literate. And the book above all others that people wanted to read for themselves was the Bible. They wanted to know what the text said and, more importantly, what it meant. Interpretation was the key that unlocked scripture's secrets. The library of history, poetry, philosophy, biography, prophecy and law was a complex collection that needed to be explained to people without theological training. If the priestly interpreters were not trusted to do this, who was?

The answer was a new breed of Protestant preachers. The first was Martin Luther (1483-1546). This Saxon monk's challenge to papal authority stemmed from his own anguished spiritual history. That drove him back to the study of the Greek and Hebrew originals and this, in turn, brought him to an understanding of salvation depending, not on the observance of religious rituals, but on personal response, by faith, to the initiative taken by a loving God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



The Siege of Magdeburg of 1631 took place during the Thirty Years' War

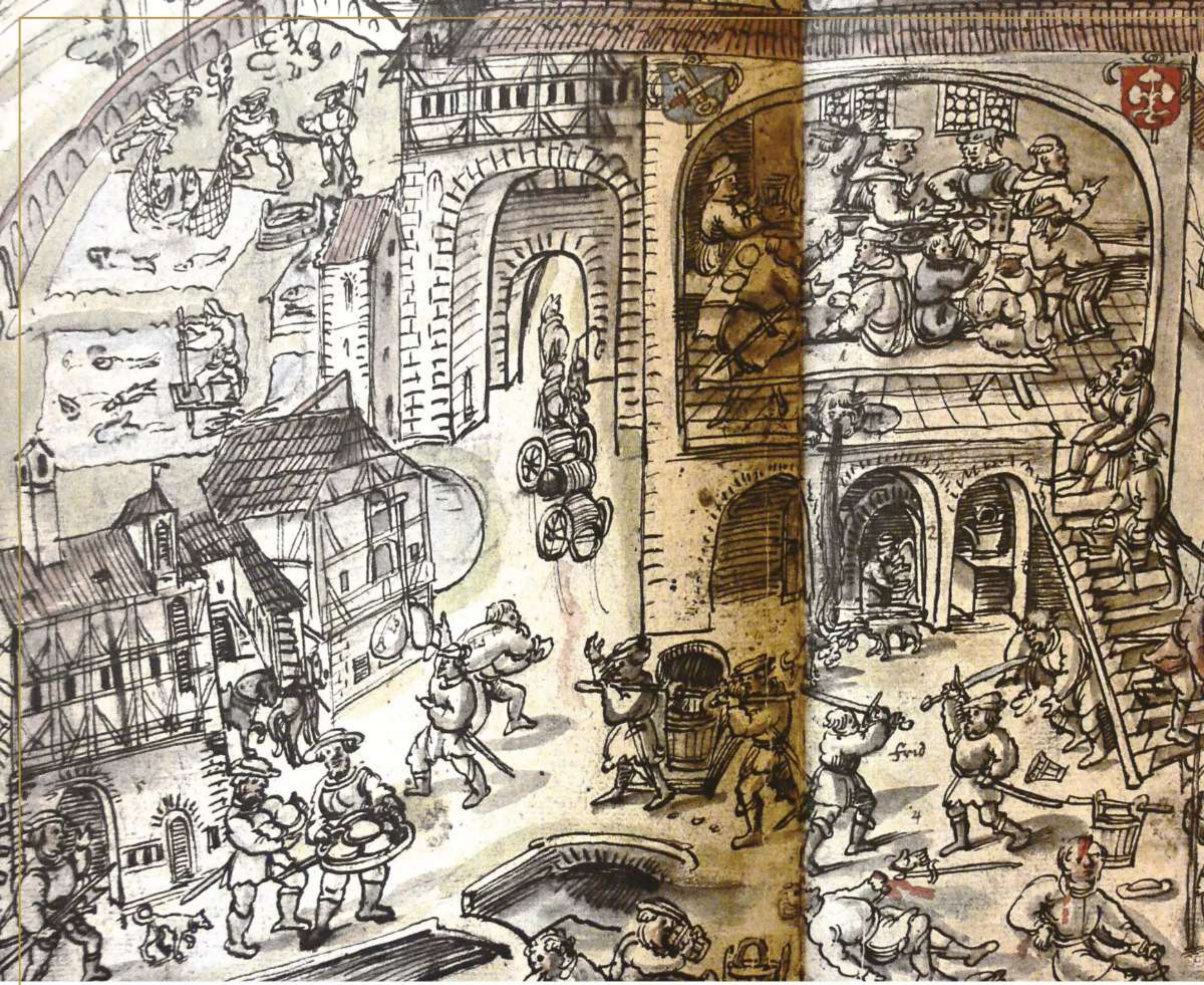
In this he was at one with Erasmus but he went on, in his famous *95 Theses*, to draw conclusions that, if true, undermined the authority of the papacy. Luther made his own German translation of the Bible (New Testament 1522, Old Testament 1534). The result was not only a clear exposition but a classic of German literature. It contained more than the plain text; it elaborated on the original in explanatory notes that emphasised the core evangelical (ie gospel-based) doctrines that Luther understood as the central thread of the entire biblical narrative.

FUEL TO THE FIRE

It would be wrong to say that the Bible caused the social upheaval and warfare that devastated Europe for the next century and a half. What it did do was act as a stimulant for many conflicts that already existed. The Holy Roman Empire was a patchwork of principalities and free cities, each with its own political agenda in relation to imperial and papal activities within its territory. Some remained loyal to the papacy. Others embraced Lutheranism as their state religion. Luther had been condemned at the Diet of Worms in 1521 and, in distant Rome, the pope clamoured for him and his followers to be exterminated. North of the Alps the situation was not that simple.

"Because now the Common Man everywhere thirsts after God's Word and the Gospel, which... have recently spread much more widely than before... If we accept, approve or allow to be enforced even the slightest barrier to the Gospel's spread, the honourable, free and Imperial cities... could not only not enforce such a law, but they would doubtless provoke widespread disturbances, rebellion, murder, bloodshed, yes, total ruin and every sort of evil..."

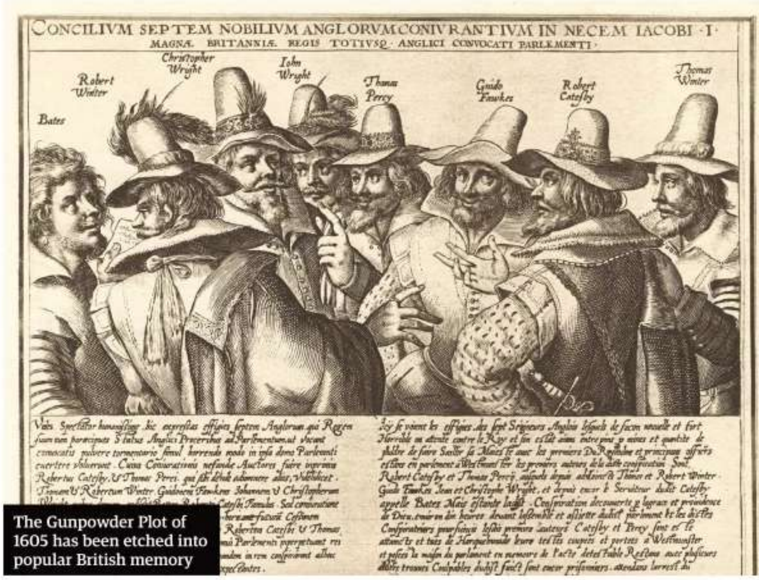
That was the official response from one of the imperial cities. The 'Common Man' was nursing numerous grievances against his secular and religious overlords. Rebellion was in the air and the 'freedom' Luther seemed to be teaching was grasped by popular leaders as providing divine sanction for the forcible overthrow of the religious and secular hierarchies oppressing the people. In 1524-5 violence broke out in several parts of central Germany. The disorganised and poorly armed working people were easily overwhelmed by troops sent against them by their overlords (Luther denounced the rebels and urged their suppression) but the cost of the Peasants' War was horrendous. At least 100,000



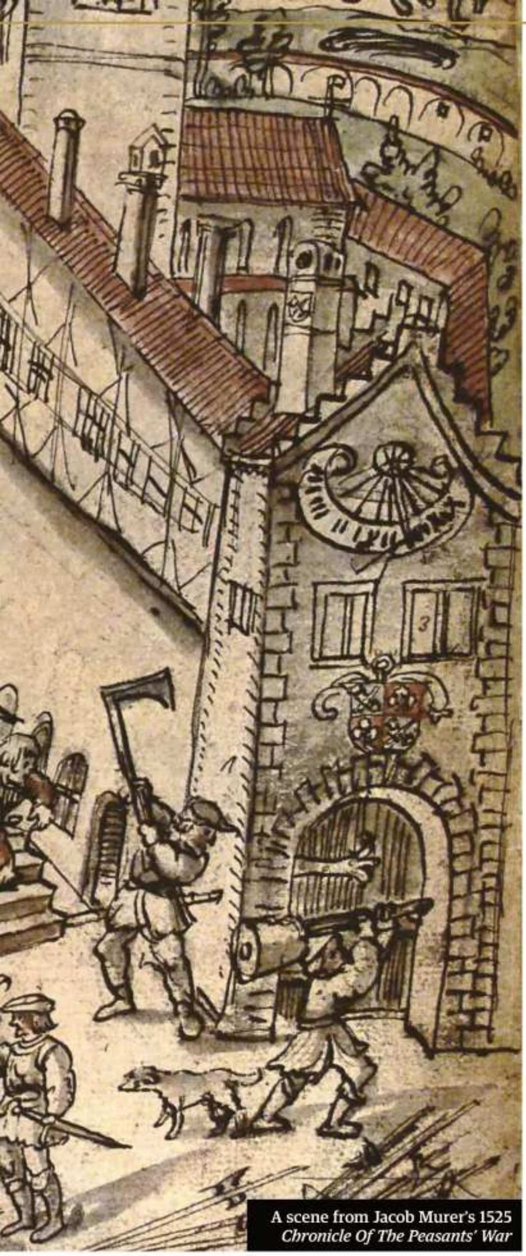
WHAT'S IN A NAME?
Breaking from Catholicism

For centuries individuals and breakaway groups had protested about the teachings and/or practices of the Western Church but dissent came to a head in the 1520s. At the Diet of Worms in 1521, the teachings of Martin Luther were outlawed in the Holy Roman Empire but they spread throughout many states of the Empire as princes and leaders of free cities accepted 'evangelical' teaching (ie beliefs based on study of the Bible, rather than doctrines of the Catholic Church).

To prevent divisions within the Empire - and particularly to maintain unity in the face of the Muslim threat from the East - the emperor was inclined to permit a measure of toleration but Catholic reactionaries exerted mounting pressure. In 1529 a meeting of the imperial diet was summoned at Speyer to co-ordinate action against the Turkish advance towards Hungary. The Catholic majority now demanded a tougher religious line, specifically rejecting the right of state rulers to decide the religion to be pursued in their territories. Against this, six evangelical princes and the evangelical leaders of 14 cities signed a document against being forced to endorse teaching dictated by Rome. "In matters which concern God's honour and salvation and the eternal life of our souls," they insisted, "everyone must stand and give account before God for himself." The document was called a 'Protestation'. A new word had been added to all the languages of Europe.


CONCILIVM SEPTEM NOBILIVM ANGLORVM CONIVRANTIVM IN NECEM IACOBI · I ·
MAGNÆ BRITANNIÆ REGIS TOTIVSQ · ANGLICI CONVOCATI PARLAMENTI ·
Bates
Robert Winter
Christopher Wright
John Wright
Thomas Percy
Guido Fawkes
Robert Catesby
Thomas Winter

The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 has been etched into popular British memory



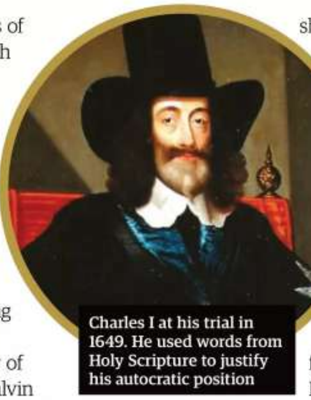
A scene from Jacob Murer's 1525 *Chronicle Of The Peasants' War*

"THE KINGS OF FRANCE AND SPAIN USED FORCE TO BRING THE 'HERETICS' TO HEEL"

simple people were slaughtered. It was one of the worst bloodbaths in European history. More than that, it gave rise to a number of radical sects (who are sometimes lumped together as 'Anabaptists') whose teaching was based on wild apocalypticism and extremist interpretation of Bible passages.

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

It was not only trouble-making revolutionaries who deviated from Luther's understanding of the Bible. Because the reformers who would come to be called 'Protestants' believed in the personal revelation given by God to all who sincerely studied his word, they recognised no unifying human authority: there was no 'Protestant pope'. Various preachers and pastors emerged in different places and, though they agreed on the basics of Protestant theology, there were sufficient points of difference to prevent them uniting. It was all a matter of 'interpretation, interpretation, interpretation'. In 1529, a meeting of leading Protestant theologians was called at Marburg in the principality of Hesse. They reached agreement on 14 out of 15 points of doctrine. The last point dealt with the Communion service, or Lord's Supper. Luther insisted on taking a literal meaning of Jesus' words: "This is my body; this is my blood". He believed passionately that a physical change took place in the elements. In contrast, the other theologians opted for some kind of symbolical meaning to the words.



Charles I at his trial in 1649. He used words from Holy Scripture to justify his autocratic position

The leading protestant thinker of the next generation was John Calvin (1509-64), a French scholar who was forced to flee persecution and settled in Geneva. There he published a comprehensive manual of Protestant doctrine that was an answer to the *Summa Theologiae* of the 13th-century scholar, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). Calvin's *Institutes Of The Christian Religion* was a systematic exposition of biblical teaching. But, again, it did not please all evangelical Christians. Some, for example, could not accept Calvin's belief in double predestination, the doctrine that God pre-ordained some people to be saved and others to be damned.

By the second half of the century Calvinism had become a major force in France (where the Protestants were called Huguenots) and the Low Countries. The kings of France and Spain (which owned the southern Netherlands), egged on by the pope, used force to bring the 'heretics' to heel. The French Wars of Religion lasted from 1562 to 1598. The Dutch War of Independence extended from 1568 to 1648.

GUNPOWDER, TREASON AND PLOT

Even countries that avoided major war on their own soil could not entirely escape violent conflict over religion. England opted for its own brand of Calvinism in the reign of Edward VI (1547-53) but successive popes did their utmost to bring the nation back into the Catholic fold. They sponsored plots and backed the Spanish king, Philip II, to invade the country in 1558. As late as 1605 it was passionate devotion to papal authority that fuelled the most notorious mass assassination attempt in English history. "Remember, remember the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot" - so ran the rhyme English children were soon chanting as every autumn they celebrated the failure of a scheme to blow up King James I and most of the nation's political leaders. But while we recall such spectacular events as the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the failure of the Gunpowder Plot, we should not forget the numerous little wars throughout the 16th century unsuccessfully waged in Ireland by an English government determined to Protestantise Catholic Ireland.

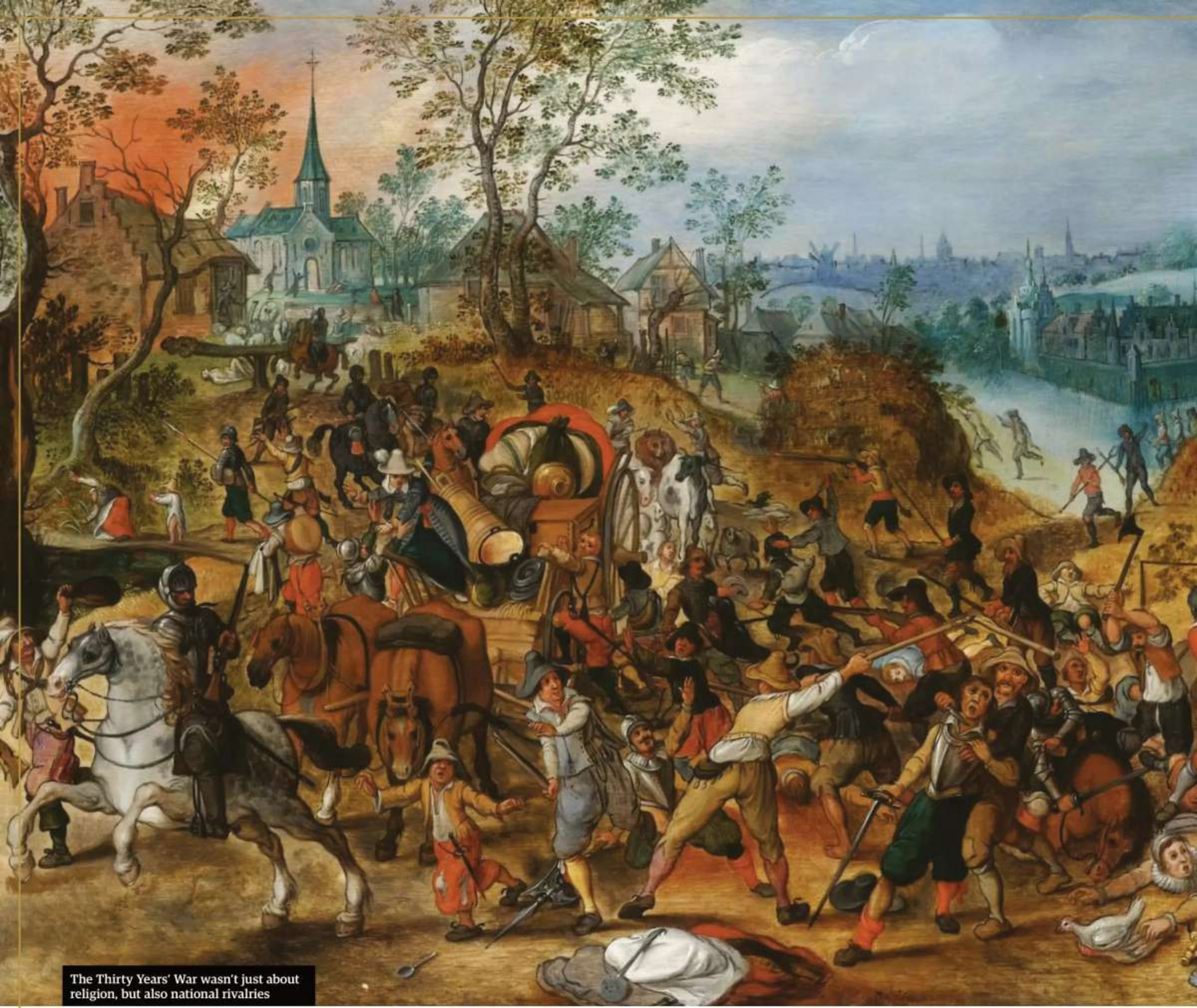
Nor should we lose sight of the fact that it was vernacular Bibles that kept alive the faith of individuals and inspired many to challenge the rival authority of the pope in Rome. By the end of the 16th century readers from Scotland to Hungary, France to Poland, Switzerland to Norway were able to study the sacred text in their own languages. And in 1610, English Catholic scholars working in exile in Rheims published a papally-approved Bible for the use of their missionaries working in England. Ruefully they confessed in their preface:

"We do not publish upon erroneous opinion of necessity, that the holy Scriptures should always be in our mother tongue, or that they ought, or were ordained by God, to be read indifferently of all… but upon special consideration of the present time, state and condition of our country, unto which divers things are either necessary, or profitable and medicinal now, that otherwise in the peace of the church were neither much requisite, nor perchance wholly tolerable."

RELIGION AS AN EXCUSE

With Europe now divided into Catholic and Protestant camps, it was unlikely that further military conflict could be avoided but the continent was about to suffer the worst war in its history. The Thirty Years' War (1618-48) was not just about religion. It was about national rivalries, the future of the Holy Roman Empire, the ambitions of mercenary military leaders and the aspirations of small states for self-determination. But because all the peoples involved subscribed to one or other of the various brands of Christianity that had become established, participants claimed religious justification for their activities.

The papacy was desperate to regain the loyalty of Protestant states in northern Europe. The Holy Roman Emperor used Catholicism to impose unity on his crumbling domain. Leading Protestant states went to the aid of weaker Protestant nations. Individuals from several countries took up arms in what they believed was a holy cause. Without acknowledging the strength of religious feeling among the combatants it is impossible to understand the ferocity of the war or the appalling atrocities committed on both sides. This was Europe's last - and worst - religious war.

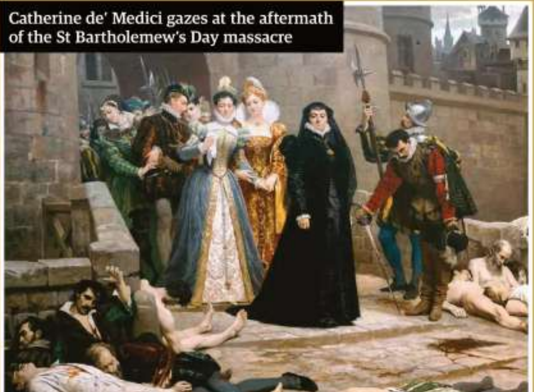


The Thirty Years' War wasn't just about religion, but also national rivalries

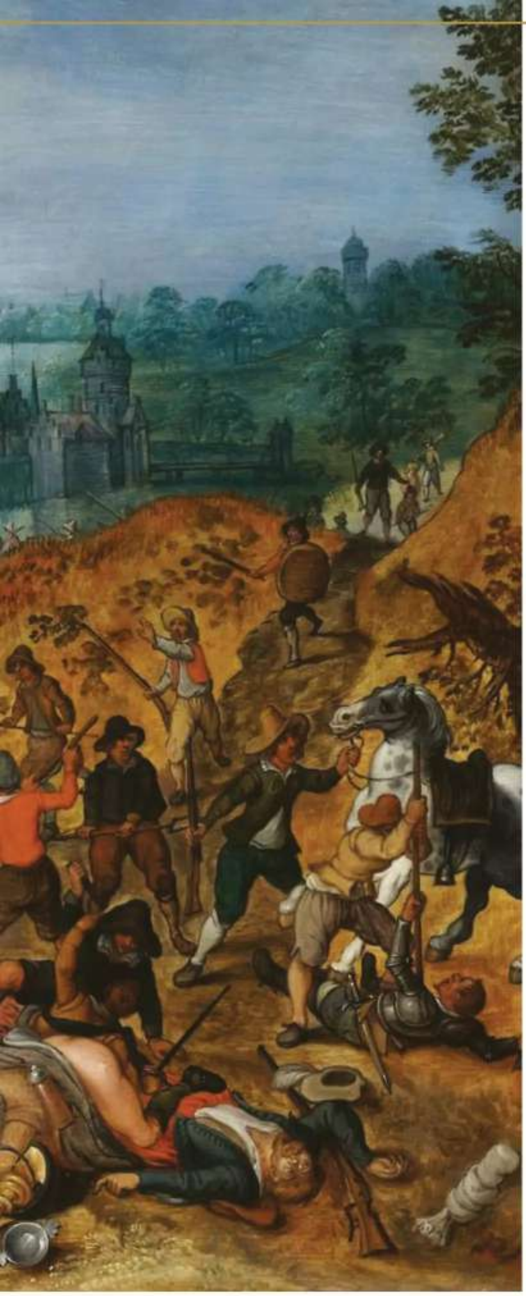
A FRENCH BLOODBATH

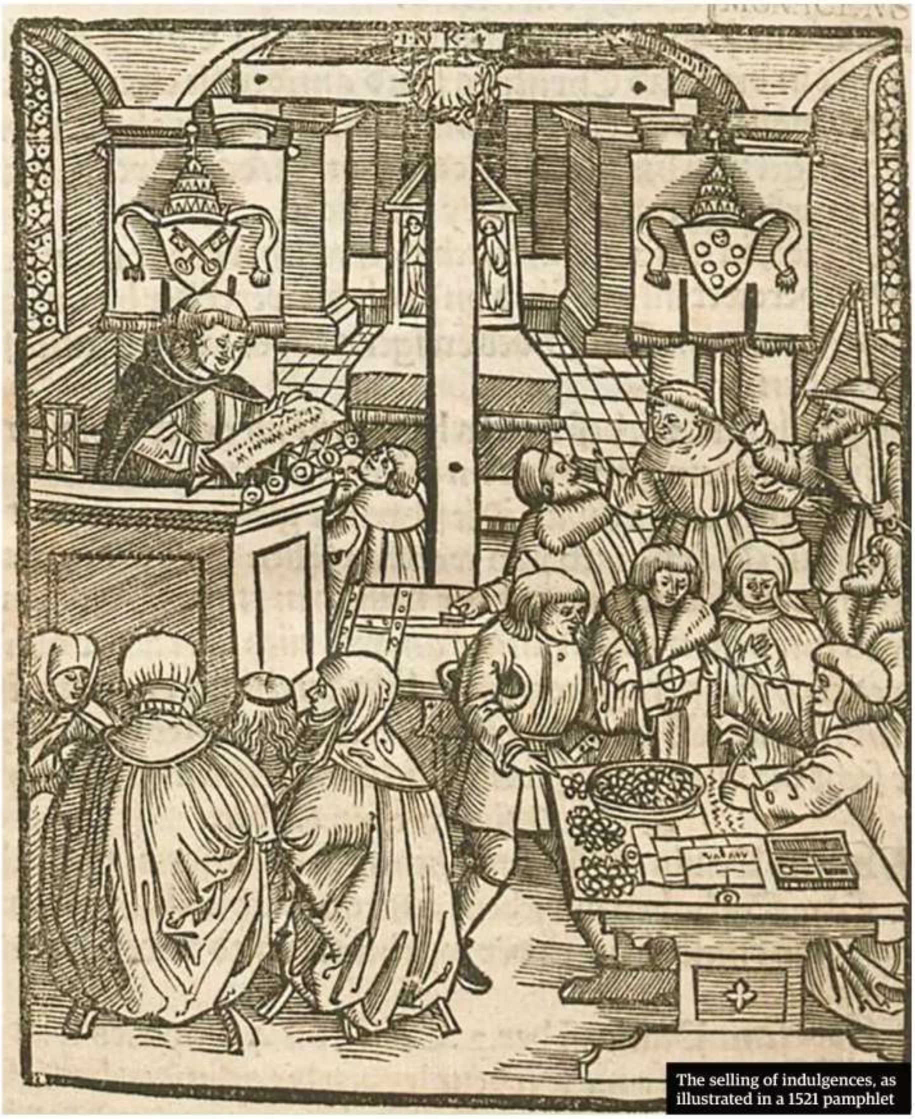
A right royal massacre

Nothing better illustrates the intense emotions stirred up by religious rivalry than the wave of hatred that swept through France in August 1572. National instability was fed by ineffective government, religious division and aristocratic rivalry. Charles IX (1550-74) had been king since the age of ten. His mother, Catherine de' Medici, acted as regent during her son's minority but effectively continued to be the real ruler, since Charles was mentally unstable. Staunchly Catholic herself, she was under pressure from noble factions supporting rival religious causes. French Calvinists (Huguenots) were making gains, particularly in the south of the country. Catherine was torn between the desire to restore peace to France and her alarm at this surge of Protestant success. She arranged a marriage between her daughter, Margaret, and Henry, King of Navarre, the Huguenot leader. At the same time, she planned the assassination of the prominent Protestant Admiral Gaspard de Coligny when he came to the celebration. The plot failed; Coligny was only wounded but this stirred the Huguenots and Catherine, fearing a backlash, sanctioned the Catholic leaders to strike first. On St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August, royal troops butchered several prominent Huguenots. Catholic mobs, taking their lead from the government, ran amok. The streets ran red with blood. The frenzy spread to other towns and did not stop until more than 5,000 French men, women and children had been butchered by their own neighbours.



Catherine de' Medici gazes at the aftermath of the St Bartholemew's Day massacre





The selling of indulgences, as illustrated in a 1521 pamphlet

It began when the intensely pious Emperor Ferdinand II tried to end Hussite political influence in Bohemia. The councillors in Prague showed their contempt by throwing the imperial envoys from a high window in the town hall (the Defenestration of Prague). This led to a brief war and the crushing of the Bohemian nationalists at the Battle of the White Mountain (1620). Ferdinand followed this up with severe reprisals, including an order that all non-Catholics were to convert on pain of death. Over the next few years, Ferdinand launched a Catholic crusade aimed at recovering territories lost to Lutheran and Catholic regimes over the previous century. Aided by Spain and employing well-trained mercenary armies, he met with remarkable success. But his triumph was his undoing.

Alarmed by the Catholic threat, Protestant states - imperial principalities, the Dutch Republic and the Scandinavian nations - took a stance and lined up against the Catholic megalith. France, wary of the growing power of its old rivals, Spain and the Empire, actually came in on the Protestant side and nations like England and Scotland, though not formally engaged, sent volunteer armies to aid their co-religionists nonetheless.

The appearance of a brilliant military leader in Sweden proved to be a game changer. King Gustavus Adolphus (who was financially backed by France) joined the war in 1630. In a series of campaigns over the next four years, the Swedish-led coalition managed to wipe out many of the imperial gains, even though Gustavus Adolphus met his death at the Battle of Lützen (1632). The remaining years of the war resolved into a bruising dynastic/territorial contest between the French and the Habsburg rulers of Spain and the Empire. By the time all the contenders had fought themselves into a state of complete exhaustion, there were preachers on both sides so appalled by the violence, carnage and devastation that they believed they were witnessing Armageddon, prophesied in the Bible as the final battle between the forces of heaven and hell. Analysis by CV Wedgwood, the historian of the war, provides macabre details that help to explain this belief:

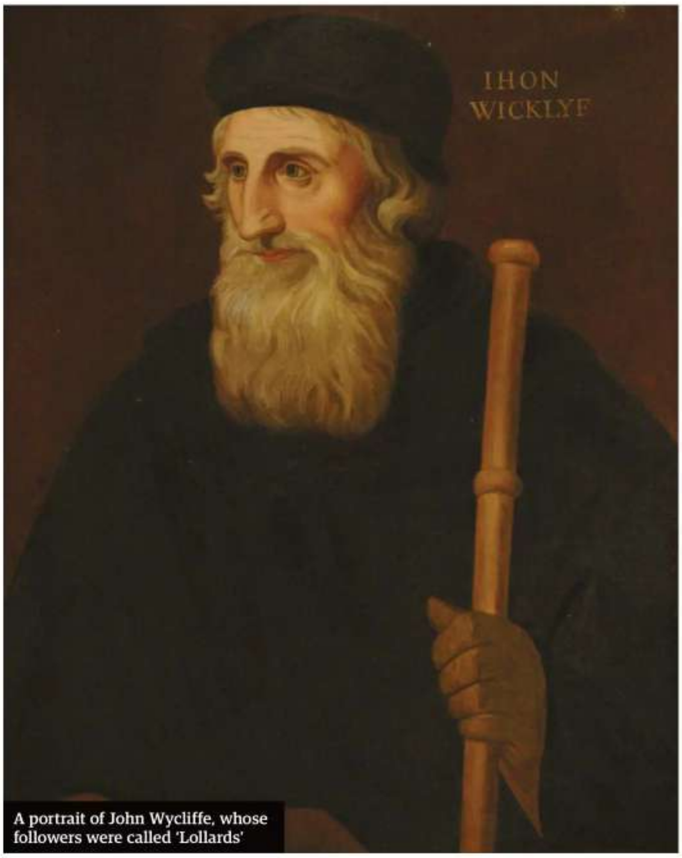
"At Frankfurt-on-the-Oder pestilence bred of the rotting bodies of the dead had overwhelmed the survivors. At Stettin and Spandau the Swedes had left the plague, in the towns of Durlach and Lorch, at Würzburg and in the whole province of Württemberg; at Bamberg the bodies lay unburied in the streets, and on both banks of the Rhine there was famine... The harvest of 1632 promised well, but in Bavaria and Swabia the passing troops trampled it down; in Bavaria there was neither corn left to grind nor seed to sow for the year to come; plague and famine wiped out whole villages, mad dogs attacked their masters, and the authorities posted men with guns to shoot down the raving victims before they could contaminate their fellows; hungry wolves abandoned the woods and mountains to roam through the deserted hamlets, devouring the dying and the dead."

REFORMATION MORPHS INTO REVOLUTION

Spreading the word of change

The sad career of Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489-1525) illustrates the confused and sometimes violent feelings just waiting to leap out like a jack-in-the-box when theologians like Luther turned the key. He was a mystic, a musician and a preacher who thrilled to the reformer's message. Driven by Lutheran teaching to turn away from Catholic dogma to the Bible, he drifted into interpretations of the text that were highly individualistic. He believed that Christians should be led by the Spirit of God, rather than the word of God, that the end of the world was at hand and that true believers were to prepare the way for the final showdown between good and evil. That meant that they should turn against the corrupt church and state, by such activities as destroying religious images and refusing to pay taxes. This message appeared to give divine sanction to social revolution and appealed to people at the bottom of the social scale who felt themselves downtrodden and ill-used. Müntzer thus became one of the zealous standard bearers of the Peasants' War (1524-5), going on a preaching tour throughout south west Germany before returning to Mühlhausen where he formed an armed band to challenge the superior forces of the ruling class. Eventually his rebel rabble met up with their 'worldly' enemy at Frankenhausen on 11 May 1525. It was no contest. Six thousand of Müntzer's men were killed in a matter of minutes. The leader fled, was captured, tortured and executed.

A statue of Müntzer stands in Mühlhausen



A portrait of John Wycliffe, whose followers were called 'Lollards'

CLASH OF AUTHORITY

So, was all this misery and violence the fault of the Bible? Or, to put the question another way, how can the obscenities of 1618-1648 be squared with the gospel of peace and love? Clearly, national rivalries, personal ambitions and the lure of military plunder played major roles in the Thirty Years' War. It is also true that religion was used as a banner by various parties to rally military, political and diplomatic support. Then again, whatever motives participants claimed justified them taking part were soon lost sight of once rival commanders had 'let slip the dogs of war'. A hungry army, marching its way through villages and homelands, had very little interest in the religious beliefs of the farmers and peasants who stood between them and their next meal. However, in forming our historical judgements on their actions, we should not forget that the separation of church and state that we take for granted was still a couple of hundred years down the road in 1648. The principle cuius regio eius religio (the sovereign's religion is the religion of the state) was accepted in most countries. No nation could feel secure if its religious life was a free-for-all; if its citizens were able to believe whatever they wanted to believe.

ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

We can see the essential issues dividing royal absolutism and religious freedom in the conflict taking place in Britain and Ireland at the same time as the later stages of the Thirty Years' War. The arguments for and against toleration lay at the heart of the English Civil War (1642-51). Charles I and Oliver Cromwell both took their political stand on the Bible. Charles clashed with parliament over issues in which the civil and religious rights of the people were intertwined. Oliver Cromwell, who emerged as the leader of parliament and the army, opposed the king on principles that were similarly impossible to disentangle. When, in January 1649, the king was brought to the scaffold to be executed for crimes against the people, he said in his address to the audience, "Liberty and freedom [of the people] consists not [in] having a share in government... a subject and a sovereign are clear different things". Four years later, Cromwell, now uncrowned head of state, arbitrarily dismissed parliament with these words: "perceiving the spirit of God so strong upon me, I would not consult flesh and blood". Both men were absolutists who sought their ultimate authority in scripture. Charles believed, as his predecessors believed, that the sovereign was God's appointed viceregent in church as well as state. In St Paul's Epistle to the Romans he found these words: "There is no power but of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God" (13, 1-2 King James Version). Cromwell found in that same epistle another source of authority: "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now, if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (8, 9 King James Version). Both men claimed an authority that could not be challenged - one by virtue of his consecration; the other based upon the 'inner voice' of divine guidance. It was, indeed, central to the teaching of the New Testament that Christians would be directly guided by the Holy Spirit and that they would be able to discern people

> "NO NATION COULD FEEL SECURE IF ITS RELIGIOUS LIFE WAS A FREE-FOR-ALL; IF ITS CITIZENS WERE ABLE TO BELIEVE WHATEVER THEY WANTED TO BELIEVE"

whose words and deeds showed them to be anti-Christian. Preachers and philosophers had argued for decades whether the word of God sanctioned Christians to oppose tyranny or whether they should patiently suffer injustice - if necessary by facing death - and they would continue to do so. In the short term the royalist cause prevailed - the monarchy was restored in 1660 but the seeds of parliamentary democracy had been sown by the constitutional conflict of the 17th century.

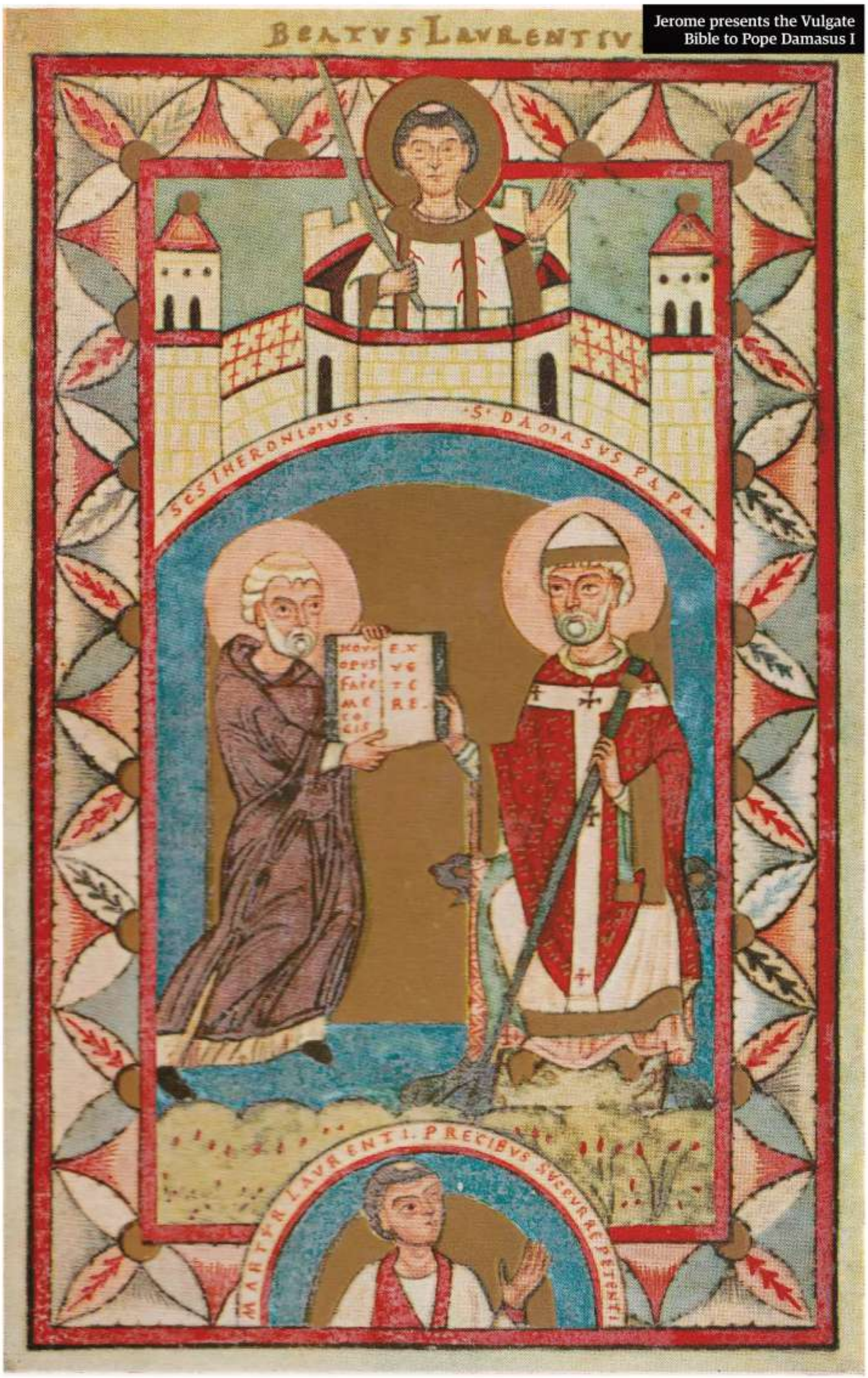
NEW RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Something else that emerged briefly in England in this period was a patchwork of miscellaneous religious groups. The parliamentary victory established the right of people to worship as they wished. Hitherto the king's subjects had been obliged to worship according to the rites of the Church of England. Once this restriction was removed, people formed churches, each based on its own interpretation of the Bible. Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Seekers and Muggletonians were just some of the non-conformist assemblies that sprang briefly to life once the rights of Englishmen to respond to the Bible message as they understood it was established. They were outlawed by the restoration of the monarchy and people dissenting from the official church suffered discrimination for more than a century.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the constant divisions among Bible-believing Christians would, long ago, have resulted in the consigning of this book to oblivion. The fact is that centuries of wars, persecutions and theological conflict have not destroyed the credibility of this unique book. On the contrary, throughout all the turmoil of human history worldwide, the Bible was and still is the most read book in the world.

A 1517 Nuremberg printing of Martin Luther's *95 Theses*

"THE PARLIAMENTARY VICTORY ESTABLISHED THE RIGHT OF PEOPLE TO WORSHIP AS THEY WISHED"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Jerome presents the Vulgate Bible to Pope Damasus I

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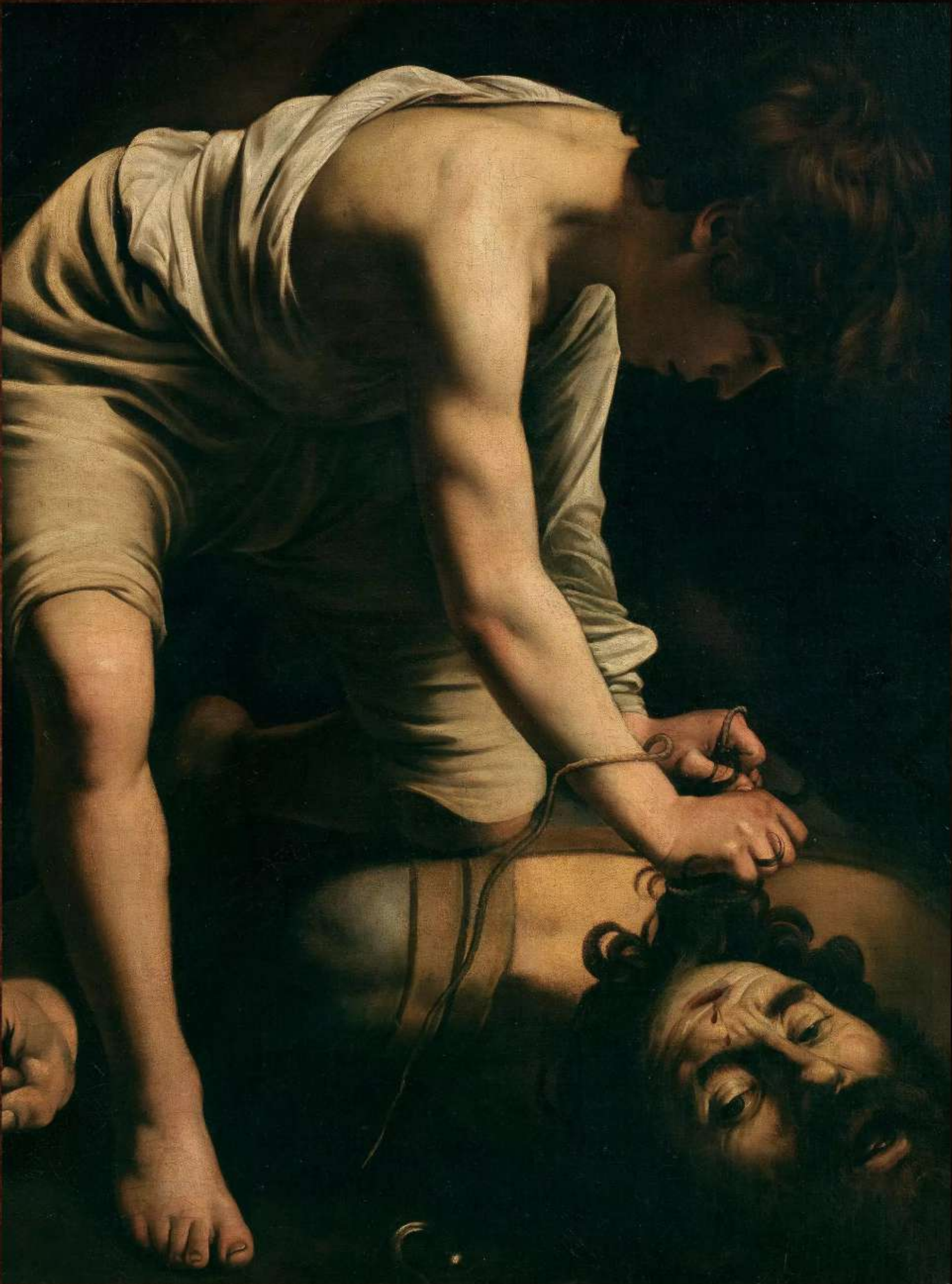


DIGGING FOR THE TRUTH

How archaeological investigation is being used to prove - or disprove - the major events told in the Bible

Words by Edoardo Albert

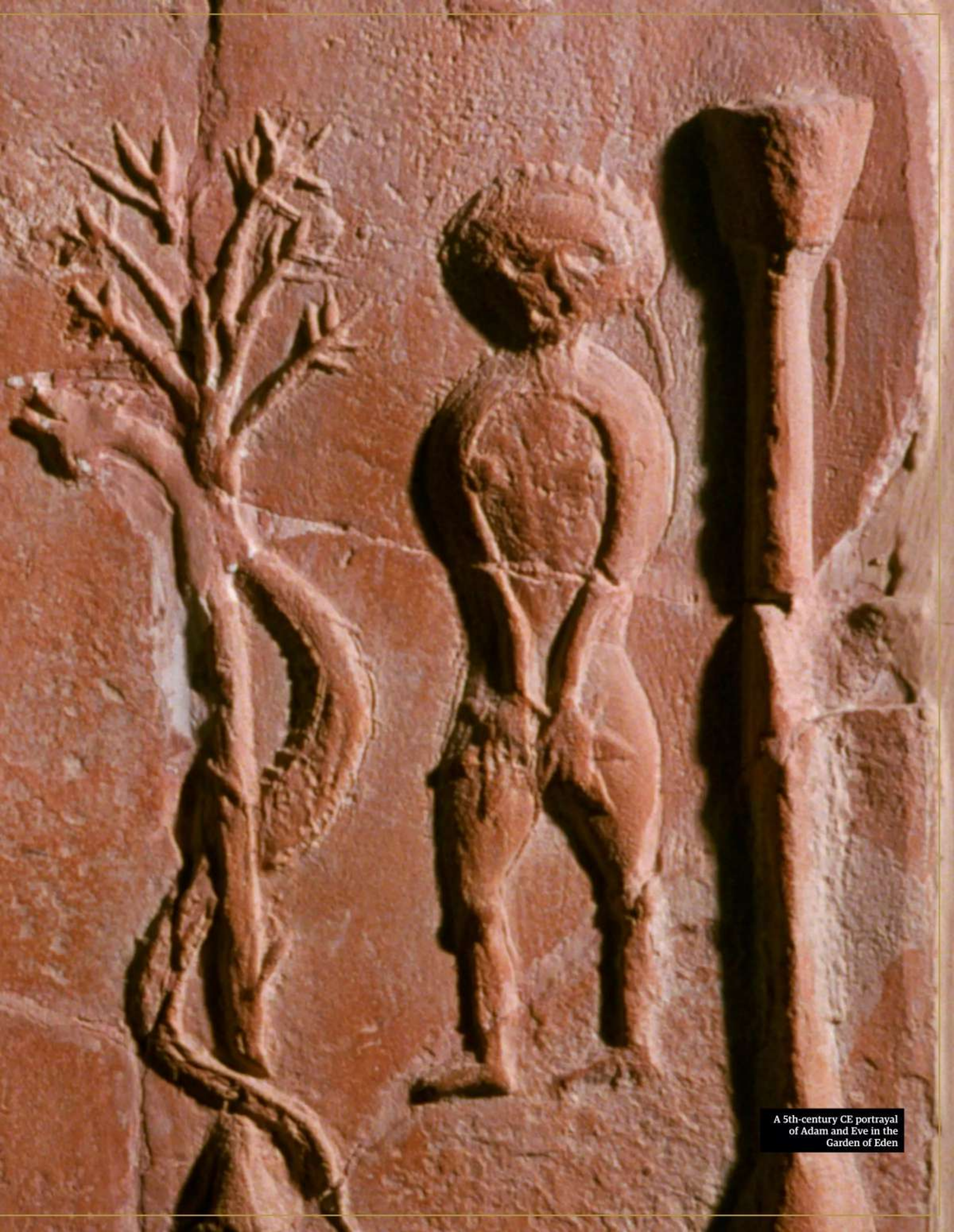
Why should anyone read the Bible? Yes, it's the foundational document for Western civilisation and increasingly important in other parts of the world; it is the source of most of the unspoken assumptions that drive the contemporary world, from the equality of every human being to the intrinsic value of individuals, but why should it still be read? One reason is because it tells a story, and a hugely compelling one at that. There are any number of individual stories in the Bible, but its overarching storyline is essentially a love story: the fateful love of God and his people, the Jews. As a text, the Bible is the greatest love story ever told.

But as a love story, it's a tale where hearts, human and divine, are broken again and again. It's a reflection on the long history of the Jews and their stubborn adherence to their God, and their equally stubborn refusal to actually live by the covenant they had sworn with him. It's a story of human and divine love, told in, through and by history and historical events. So the question arises: just how accurate is the history recounted in the Bible? Of course, the history in the Bible spans a vast period of time, from the creation of the universe to the Roman Empire, so let us start at the beginning and work our way forward.

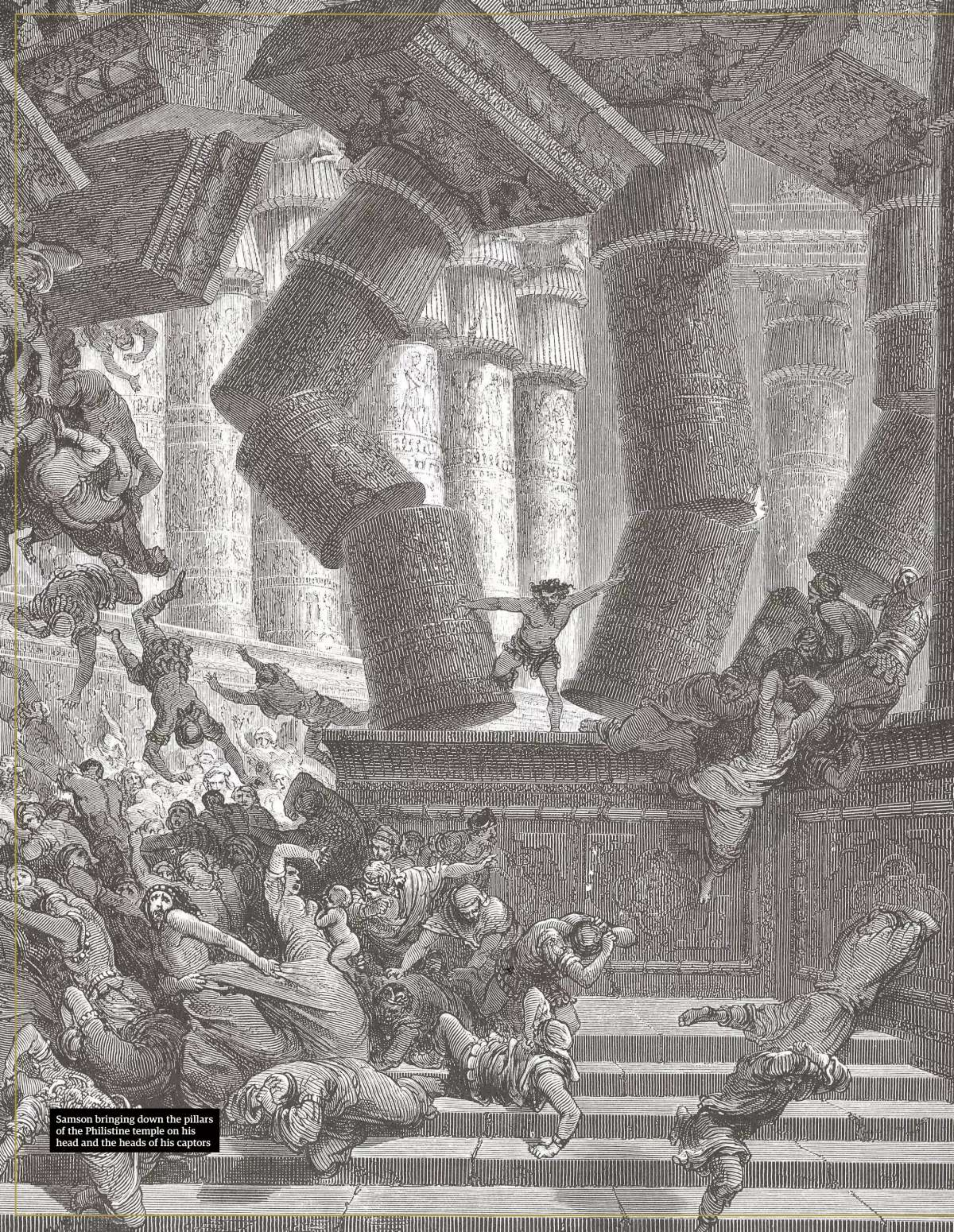
FROM GENESIS TO THE PATRIARCHS

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Score one for the Bible right at the start. Although in no way a scientific account of the creation of the universe, the Jewish account of the beginning of everything begins with the beginning of everything. This was by no means a universal idea. Most creation myths tell of the world being fashioned from something, whether that be underlying chaos or the dismembered body of a primordial god, while philosophical thought from the time of Aristotle onwards preferred the idea of an eternally existing universe. Indeed, scientific thought in the early 20th century was so uncomfortable with the idea of the universe having a beginning, Albert Einstein introduced a cosmological constant into the equations of general relativity so that they would produce a static universe: he later saw it as a great blunder on his part. As the evidence for an expanding universe accumulated, scientists even proposed, and seriously considered, a steady state theory of continuous low-level creation of fundamental particles from nothing to avoid the unpalatable truth that the universe had a beginning. But begin it did, in a big bang that looks suspiciously akin to God's command that there be light. But the Jewish people were always convinced that God - their God - was responsible for the creation and ordering of the universe.

But after the beginning, which is amenable to verification, the Bible moves on to accounts of events that lie outside any possible archaeological investigation. According to the second chapter of Genesis, God placed the first human beings: Adam and Eve, in a garden in the east. East of where is not specified although interestingly the term 'Eden' appears in a Babylonian tablet as the name for an untilled expanse of land.



A 5th-century CE portrayal of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden



Samson bringing down the pillars of the Philistine temple on his head and the heads of his captors

This is where the archaeological investigation of the Bible hits the buffers: there is simply no way of distinguishing evidence for most of the people and events in the early part of the Book of Genesis. The tale as told in Genesis is one of nomadic pastoralists, people who roamed the land tending their flocks of sheep and goats. Such a lifestyle leaves few traces behind and those they do leave are anonymous: even if an archaeologist, by some stroke of blind luck, were to find and excavate the tomb of one of the early biblical characters, there would be no way of knowing it was him since ancient tombs generally do not come with helpful identifying headstones. The most that archaeology can do for this period is see whether the general portrayal of life as conveyed in the Bible concurs with how it was actually lived at this time.

Let us start with the conflict between the sons of Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel. Cain is a farmer, Abel a shepherd. But while Abel's sacrifice of the firstborn of his flock to God was accepted by God, Cain's offerings of the fruits of the soil were not, leading Cain to plot against and eventually murder his brother. The conflict between settled farmers and wandering pastoralists over access to pastures and water sources has been a near constant theme through most of human history, so the depiction of the conflict and the final destruction of the pastoralists by the sedentary agriculturalists is accurate. The name Abel itself, which means 'emptiness', conveys well the life of the shepherd searching over barren lands for pastures for his flock.

But while a shepherd grazing his sheep will leave precious little archaeological evidence, the Flood should have left thick layers of silt in the archaeological record. Did it? Well, not really. At least not if we are looking for a worldwide flood that covered everything. However, there is a striking parallel to be found between the Bible and the Sumerian King List concerning antediluvian lifespans. According to the Bible, the descendants of Adam and Eve up until the Flood all lived to remarkable ages, with Methuselah reaching the ripe old age 969. An 18th-century BCE clay prism written over in cuneiform records a list of the kings of Sumer, the world's first civilisation, the first ten of whom reigned before the devastating flood that also figures in Sumerian history. These ten antediluvian kings all had extraordinarily long lives (tens of thousands of years in some cases compared to the centuries ascribed to the sons of Adam and Eve) but what is significant is the parallel accounts of longer antediluvian lifespans when compared to postdiluvian lifespans, indicating the biblical and Sumerian records sprang from a common tradition.

"AS FOR THE FLOOD, THERE IS CONSIDERABLE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR FREQUENT FLOODING"

As for the Flood that brought an end to this antediluvian world, there is considerable archaeological evidence for frequent flooding in the land between the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, that saw the birth of the earliest civilisations. Indeed, the sensational discovery in 1872 of a Babylonian account of the Flood was just the first of a series of ancient accounts of a catastrophic flood that have been translated from ancient cuneiform texts. Of these, the most complete is the Epic Of Gilgamesh. It tells of the quest of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, around 2600 BCE, to discover the secret of eternal life. During his quest, Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim, king of Shuruppak, who with his wife had built a great ship, taking on it many kinds of animals, and surviving the great flood that had swept the rest of humanity away. Thus the biblical account remembers events that, to those suffering them, must have seemed lke the world ending.

THE WORLD OF ABRAHAM

While the Bible traces all human beings back to Adam and Eve, the Jewish people find their beginning with Abraham, or Abram as he was first named, when God summoned him from Ur of the Chaldeans to travel to a distant land. Ur itself was then the greatest city in Mesopotamia, and one of the oldest cities in the world. As a resident of Ur, Abraham would have enjoyed a lifestyle unparalleled throughout the rest of the world. But despite the citizens of Ur worshipping a pantheon of gods including Nanna and Marduk, Abraham heeds the summons of this unnamed god and, gathering those of his family who will come with him, sets off for Canaan. The journey there probably took Abraham and his caravan, which included his beautiful but barren wife Sarah, upstream along the Euphrates to Harran, which now lies in Turkey, before they turned south, travelling via Aleppo and Damascus to Canaan. But though the land had been promised to Abraham, it had already been claimed and settled by the Canaanites. Abraham and his people were left to wander its sharp ridges and narrow valleys, a place very different from the broad alluvial plain of the land between the two rivers from where they had come. In Shechem, Abraham built an altar and sacrificed to the god who had called him there. By 2500 BCE there was city in Shechem, which is recorded on the Ebla tablets, and its endurance is confirmed by the city's second appearance on an Egyptian stele dating from 1850 BCE.

However, not long after Abraham's arrival in Canaan a famine struck the land, forcing him to take his family and his flocks to seek sustenance in the one place where a harvest was guaranteed: Egypt. Watered and fertilised by the annual flooding of the Nile, the fields of the river's delta sustained the Egyptians despite their living in the north west of the Sahara Desert. So it was to Egypt that Abraham brought his family and his animals. For the Egyptians, this was not an uncommon occurrence. The tomb of Khnumhotep, a Pharaonic official of the 25th century BCE, includes a fresco of a group of refugees from Canaan, led by a man named Abishai, negotiating entry into Egypt.

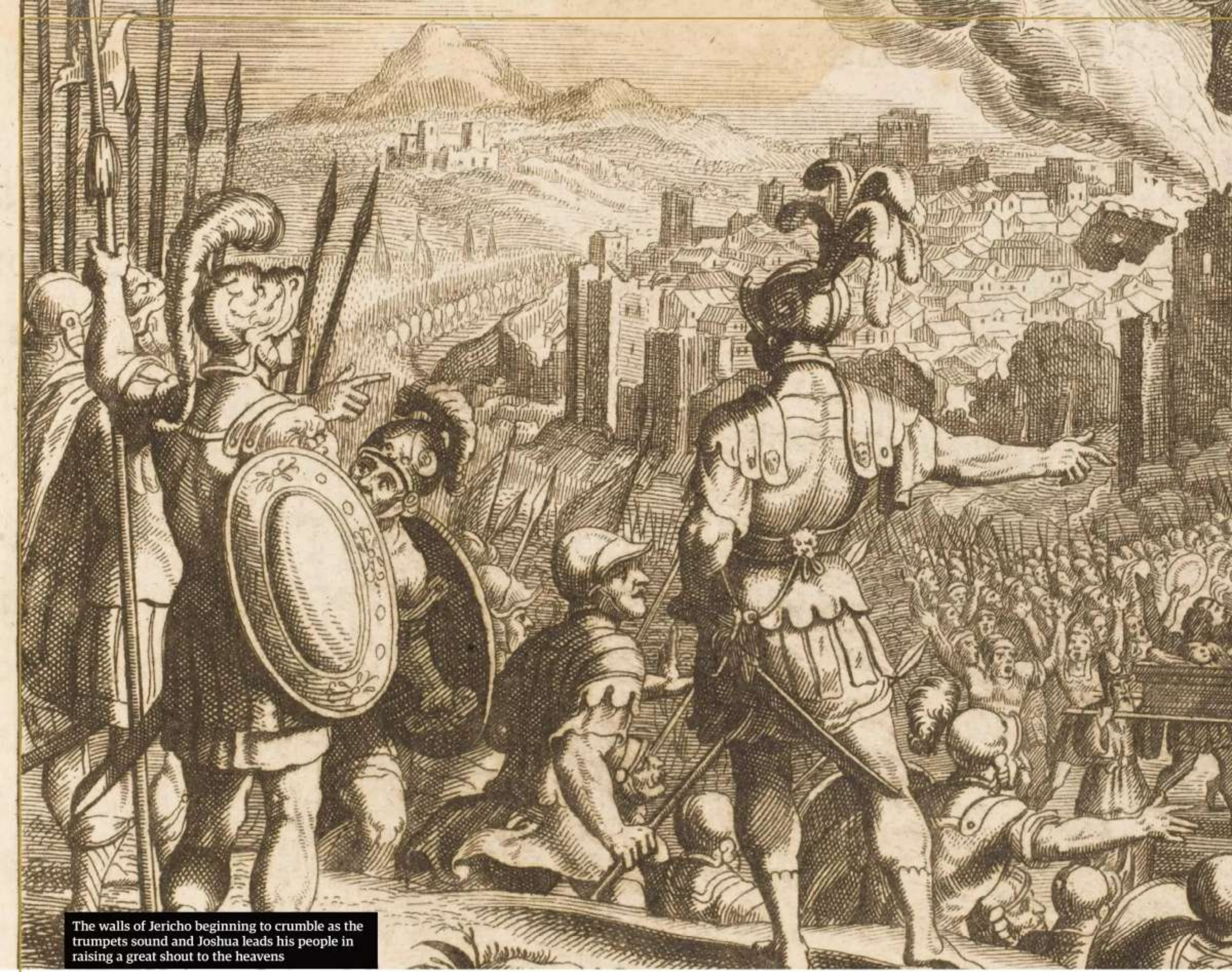
When Abraham and his extended family finally returned to Canaan, Abraham's wife, Sarah, conceived a child. They were both old by this time, so much so that when God told Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son, Abraham "fell on his face and laughed" (Genesis 17:17). In one of the word plays

THE FIRST SCRIPT

Cuneiform tablets give access to an ancient world

Around 3500 BCE, Sumerian merchants who needed to keep tally of what they were buying and selling began scratching symbols into slabs of wet clay. This hardened, making a permanent record, and eventually simplified to become pictograms. This cuneiform writing was incredibly durable. Unlike papyrus, or paper, clay does not decay or rot. Whole libraries of cuneiform tablets have survived to the present day, stored in the great museums of the world, the vast majority still awaiting translation by the small band of scholars who can read them. It was on excavated cuneiform tablets that the Epic of Gilgamesh was found and translated, although the majority of tablets contain much more mundane information that hark back to their first function as tallies of sale and receipt. Somewhere between 500,000 and 2 million have been excavated. Of these, between 30,000 and 100,000 have been read and translated. Who knows what awaits discovery in the vast number of cuneiform tablets patiently waiting for their first reader in millennia?

One of the cuneiform tablets that tell the story of Gilgamesh



The walls of Jericho beginning to crumble as the trumpets sound and Joshua leads his people in raising a great shout to the heavens

that Genesis delights in, God then gave that son the name Isaac, which means 'laughter'. With God's covenant made, and Abram and Sarai renamed Abraham and Sarah, that covenant was inscribed in the flesh of Abraham and his descendants through the rite of circumcision. But when Isaac was still a boy, and the delight of his old father's eyes, God demanded that Abraham offer him in sacrifice.

This is one of the strangest, and hardest, stories of the Bible. While, in the end, God stays the hand that Abraham had raised to sacrifice Isaac, it asks why should God request such a thing and why should Abraham assent, seemingly without demur. But it turns out the real question is why shouldn't God ask such a sacrifice of Abraham? For Abraham had grown up and lived among cultures that accepted child sacrifice as a necessary part of their religious rituals: that which was dearest to them should be offered to the gods so that which they desired should come about. Growing up in such a milieu, Abraham took it as normal that God should expect him to use the knife to bleed Isaac to death before offering his son's body as a burnt offering, its savour rising to the heavens with the smoke of his burning. The Genesis account represents the Jewish people's radical refusal to accept the religious norms of their time, norms that continued among the Canaanites and around the Mediterranean for centuries. For instance, a Canaanite text found at Ugarit states: "A first-born, Baal, we shall sacrifice. A child we shall fulfill." Already the Jews were a people set apart.

THE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM

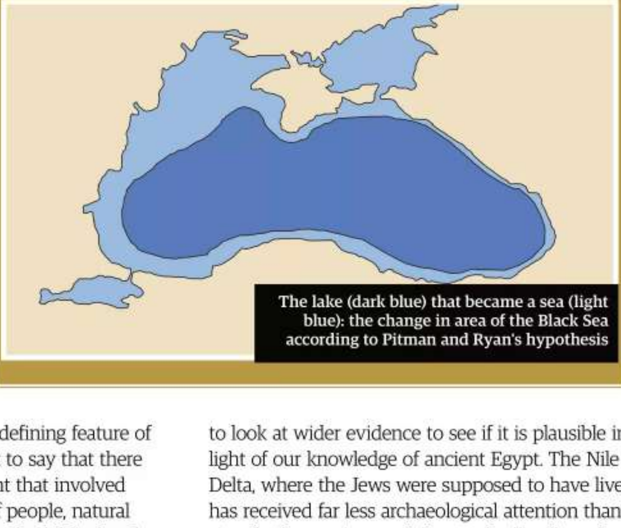
With Isaac's life spared, Abraham's line could continue. Isaac fathered two sons, Esau and Jacob. And it appears that we might, we just might, have some archaeological evidence for the existence of the man who wrestled with God. In 1969 a scarab, dating to circa 1730 BCE, was found in a tomb in the suburbs of Haifa, Israel. The scarab bears the hieroglyphic name Y'qb-HR. In 1930, another scarab was found, also in Israel, bearing the same name but framed by a cartouche, which is a marker for royalty. Y'qb-HR is the West Semitic name Yaqub-Haddu, essentially 'Jacob', written in hieroglyphics. Whether this is the biblical Jacob is impossible to tell, but it's certainly suggestive.

Jacob, of course, had 12 sons of which Joseph was his favourite, the one to whom he gave a splendid coat that occasioned feverish jealousy among Joseph's siblings, so much so that they sold Joseph to a passing caravan as a slave while telling their father that his favourite son had been killed by wild animals. The story of Joseph's sojourn in Egypt and his eventual adoption by Pharaoh as his vizier is one of the best known in the Bible but does bear signs of being a later interpolation: the Egyptian names given date from the first millennium rather than the second, and the camels that the slave traders who took Joseph were supposed to have been riding are generally not thought to have been domesticated by this time. However, during the reign of pharaohs Senwosret III and Amenemhet III in the 19th and early 18th centuries, the Nilometers, the careful Egyptian recording of the height of the Nile flooding that are still extant, show rapid fluctuations. Since the Egyptian harvest directly depended on the regular Nile flood and its level, perhaps Joseph lived then, and directed the Pharaoh's policies. Particularly suggestive in this regard is the fact that during Senwosret's reign the Pharaoh took under his control

THE DAM BURST

Did the opening of the Black Sea to the Mediterranean inspire the Flood story?

In 1993 two American scientists, Walter Pitman and William Ryan, were surveying the Black Sea when they realised that the area they were exploring, the Sea of Azov that lies north east of the Crimean Peninsula, had once been dry land. Cores extracted from the sea bed found something else fascinating. While the top layer bore the shells of salt water molluscs, not far beneath that was a layer of sediment containing molluscs that can only live in fresh water. The Black Sea had once been the Black Lake and not so long ago either, as the freshwater molluscs were dated to circa 5600 BCE. As a lake, the area under water, although still considerable, was much smaller than it is today but at some point the salt waters of the Mediterranean broke through, turning the large freshwater lake into the huge Black Sea - and drowning anything and anyone living along its shores. According to Pitman and Ryan's analysis, the breakthrough was catastrophic, with a waterflow 200 times that of the Niagara Falls pouring through the breach every day until the two seas, the Mediterranean and the Black, reached the same level. Many archaeologists, averse to theories of catastrophe, have criticised the theory since it was proposed, preferring a more gradual inundation. But the Black Sea deluge would go a long way towards explaining why so many peoples who live near the area share a legend of the overwhelming flood.



The lake (dark blue) that became a sea (light blue): the change in area of the Black Sea according to Pitman and Ryan's hypothesis

the farms and estates of the Egyptian nobility: "So Joseph purchased all of the Egyptian territory for Pharaoh. Every Egyptian sold his field, because the famine's effect was so severe. That's how Pharaoh came to own the land" (Genesis 47:20).

But while there is no direct evidence for Joseph's role in Egypt, there is incontrovertible evidence that many people from the east, from Canaan and beyond, came into the Nile Delta between the 18th and 16th centuries BCE because they took control of the country, forcing the Egyptian pharaohs to flee 350 miles south to a new capital at Thebes.

THE EXODUS

"Why is this night different from all other nights?" For at least 3,000 years, the youngest person gathered at the table for the Seder, the Passover, has asked this and it is for one of the elders to answer it, passing on the tradition of the defining experience of the Jewish people: the Exodus, when God brought his people out of bondage in Egypt "with signs and wonders" (Deuteronomy 26:8).

But if the Exodus is the defining feature of the Jewish people, the failure to find definite evidence for it has become possibly the defining feature of biblical archaeology. This is not to say that there are no possibilities, but an event that involved the movement of thousands of people, natural disasters and destruction on, well, a biblical scale should be obvious. Perhaps the greatest difficulty lies in working out when this was all supposed to have happened. The assumption has been that it was during the reign of Ramesses II in the 13th century BCE for the obvious reason that the biblical account states that the Jews, reduced to a state of slavery, "built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh" (Exodus 1:11). However, there is no evidence of an exodus of slaves during the reign of Ramesses II, although as a master of self-aggrandisement it's unlikely that Ramesses would have commissioned any monuments recording a personal defeat on this scale. At the current level of understanding, there are plausible datings for the Exodus ranging from the 16th century BCE through to the 12th century BCE.

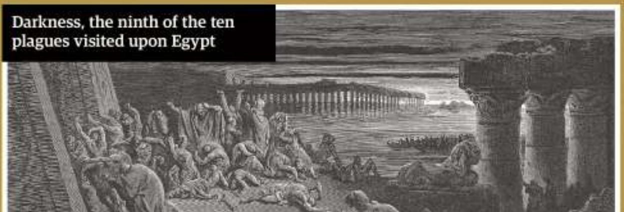
So if we cannot say when the Exodus happened, can we nevertheless aver that it actually did occur, even if we cannot say when? To do that, we have to look at wider evidence to see if it is plausible in light of our knowledge of ancient Egypt. The Nile Delta, where the Jews were supposed to have lived, has received far less archaeological attention than sites further upriver and the regular flooding of the land has ensured that not a single papyrus has survived in this region for any period in the long history of Egypt. So for evidence of historicity we have to look for more circumstantial evidence. First, it is clear that nomadic pastoralists came regularly into the Delta to pasture and water their animals. Egyptian records tell how slaves and prisoners of war were put to work making mud bricks, each man being set a daily quota by the overseer, as recorded in the Bible. Perhaps the most compelling indirect evidence for the Exodus is how ignoble a story it tells: origin myths don't normally feature the slavery and prolonged bondage of a people but rather tell of an altogether more glorious past. Indeed, according to the principle of embarrassment - that the less well a story reflects on the teller then the more likely it is to be true - there is a great deal in the Bible that has a prima facie case for being historically true, from Abraham passing

THE PLAGUES OF EGYPT

Does an Egyptian stele record the plagues visited on Pharaoh's people?

A stele, an engraved stone slab, found in the Temple of Karnak in Luxor that was set up for the Pharaoh Ahmose (reigned circa 1549-24 BCE), is highly unusual in that it records a series of devastating events that afflicted Egypt, including tempests of rain, darkness in the west and floods, affecting the whole of the country as far south as Thebes. The reign of Pharaoh Ahmose roughly coincides with the Santorini eruption. This was one of the largest volcanic eruptions in human history. A huge dust cloud was thrown up, causing disruption across the eastern Mediterranean. Many of the effects of a major eruption are similar to biblical plagues: the darkness that descended on the land for three days could be the effect of the volcanic dust descending over the country; thunder and hail visited Egypt, and freak thunder storms and showers of volcanic pumice can accompany eruptions; the dust that caused an attack of boils on men and beasts might be skin irritations resulting from volcanic dust; the death of Egyptian livestock could be because they grazed ash-covered fodder, or the thick covering of dust killed the vegetation; plagues of frogs and locusts: unusual swarmings of insects and animals have often been reported as accompanying modern-day eruptions.

So it has to be asked, could the biblical plagues have been the result of the eruption of Santorini (and thus Ahmose the Pharaoh of the Bible)? Further investigation will, hopefully, tell us more.



Darkness, the ninth of the ten plagues visited upon Egypt

The Ark, built by Noah, riding out the flood

off his wife as his sister so he could save his skin by palming her off on Pharaoh, through to David intentionally ordering his best general on a suicide mission so that he could marry the man's widow. In comparison to other texts of a similar age, which are mainly interminable panegyrics to the glory of forgotten kings, the Bible stands out completely by its penchant for stringent self-criticism, self-criticism that is most often, and uniquely, directed at the powerful and the rich. There is nothing else like this in the literature of the ancient Middle East.

Although there is no definite archaeological evidence for the Exodus, there are many things we do know happened. The details of the Pharaoh's court life mentioned in the Bible match what we know from other evidence, suggesting the writer of Exodus was basing his account on first-hand knowledge. Egypt suffered from events that resemble the biblical plagues at various points in its history. There is plentiful evidence that people, often nomadic pastoralists from Canaan, came to Egypt, settled there, and were sometimes seen as a problem by the Egyptians. We know that the Egyptians employed huge numbers of foreign slaves for various Pharaonic building projects and we know that sometimes these slaves escaped. Canaanites lived in the Nile Delta, and for a while took control of it. Couple this with the central place the Exodus has in Jewish memory, the many references to it in other books of the Bible, the extraordinary longevity of the Seder ceremony (the oldest continually enacted ritual in the world) and the fact that peoples only record periods of slavery when they are true, then the balance of evidence points clearly to the historicity of the overall events of the Exodus, even if the exact dating and details are unclear.

THE CONQUEST OF THE HOLY LAND

Having escaped from Egypt and finally making it to the Promised Land, the Jewish people found that the land was already taken. It was occupied, and its occupants were not inclined to give it up to a bunch of sheep-herding nomads. The books of the Bible from Joshua onwards recount the doings of kings and warlords, of prophets and priests, in a world that is far more recognisable, and far more specifically located, than the perambulations of the nomadic pastoralists of the Pentateuch. So there should be more archaeological evidence for this. Is there? The answer is as bedevilled by the problems of dating as is the Exodus and, at the moment, the archaeology is in a state of flux. The confident assertion in the middle of the 20th century that archaeology backed the biblical story was rocked in the second half of the century by the finding that few of the Canaanite cities recorded as having been destroyed by the invading Israelites showed evidence of destruction in the suggested time period of 13th century. However, many of these findings have now been subjected to some rigorous scrutiny. The best example of this flux is the disagreement about Jericho and its walls.

The best known incident in the conquest of Canaan is the conquest of the city of Jericho. According to the Book of Joshua, God told Joshua to have his army march around the city walls for six days and then, on the seventh day, having circled the city seven times, for all the trumpets to sound and the people shout out, and then the walls would fall down.

Jericho is one of the oldest cities in the world. The earliest excavations on it found that there was indeed a city that was destroyed, and the excavators judged the destruction to have happened circa 1400 BCE, the accepted date at the time for the arrival of the Jews in Canaan. However, the extensive excavations by Kathleen Kenyon in the 1950s redated the destruction of Jericho to circa 1550 BCE, some 150 years before Joshua was supposed to have arrived. But careful analysis of what Kenyon found has shown a clear parallel between the archaeology and the biblical account of the fall of the city. First, there is the puzzle of the storage jars full of grain. The normal military practice of the time was to take a city by siege: invest the area just before the harvest was due, so that the inhabitants of the city could not harvest their fields, and let them starve while the army outside the walls ate the crops. But in Jericho, the storage jars in even the homes of the poor were full of grain. Therefore, there was no long siege: the city fell quickly to its attackers. The reason the city fell quickly is that its walls collapsed, and collapsed suddenly: Kenyon found at least one skeleton buried under fallen bricks. The most likely explanation is that an earthquake brought down the walls of Jericho. Finally, the city itself was utterly destroyed by fire. What's more, the site lay abandoned for a century or more, despite Jericho being located by one of the best water sources in Israel. Nor were the stores of food in the city looted. Now Joshua had commanded his men to take nothing from the city, no loot or plunder whatsoever.

So we are left with a conundrum. What happened at Jericho sounds suspiciously like the account in the Bible, yet it happened 150 years before, according to most scholars, it should have happened. Therefore the only conclusion is that it can't have been Joshua that brought down the walls of this ancient city. That is where the conundrum stands at our current level of knowledge.

ISRAEL

Despite the archaeological confusion as to exactly when the Jewish people arrived in Canaan, there is at least reasonable agreement that there is evidence in the hill country of what is today Israel of the supplanting of one culture by another. Perhaps the most striking sign of this is a change in animal bones. The Canaanites loved their pork. Canaanite cities, towns and villages have many remains from pigs. But these new settlements that were being founded and expanded in the hill country have no porcine remains, only sheep and goats. While the Jewish people had secured the hill country, a new threat emerged on the coast, from a sea-faring people whom they called Philistines. Intermittent wars would continue between the Jews and the Philistines for many years. In the Book of Judges, the Jewish hero, Samson, having been captured and blinded, was taken to a Philistine temple to be mocked. But with his strength renewed, Samson was able to push apart the supporting pillars of the temple, bringing down the structure on himself and his tormentors. Excavations of Philistine temples have indeed revealed that they had a standard design, with the main roof supported by two pillars two metres apart. A tall man, an extraordinarily strong man, might be able to push the pillars off their stone bases and bring the roof down.

After Samson and the other Judges, the Bible moves on to history that is more widely attested: kings David and Solomon, and the building of the first Temple, before telling the story of the decline of Israel and its destruction at the hands of foreign invaders, the deportation of much of its people to Babylon before the restoration of the Temple. For much of this era, the Bible is a valuable historical document, even apart from its theological and philosophical significance.

The archaeological investigation of the Bible has gone through two distinct phases and is now entering a third. The first excavators were confident that they could prove the historicity of the Bible by their excavations and, indeed, at first they seemed to have done so. However, discrepancies and difficulties in tying the archaeological data convincingly to the Bible proved to increase rather than decrease during these first decades of investigation, which finally provoked a reaction. Scholars adopted a minimalist view of the Bible, deciding that it was a theological narrative rather than a historical one, and proceeded to reinterpret the evidence in light of this new paradigm. But this reaction is slowly proving as blinkered as the blind belief that archaeology would necessarily validate the Bible. At the moment, we are slowly moving towards a more balanced assessment of how archaeological investigations can help with biblical studies and the wider understanding of the history of Israel and its neighbouring countries. This is to be welcomed, for as it says in the Bible, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight" (Proverbs 12:22). And if God is on the side of truth, then so should we be, following the truth wherever it leads, without prior agendas to confirm or deny what it says in the Bible.

THE MERNEPTAH STELE

The first written record of Israel outside the Bible

In 1896, Flinders Petrie, the great British archaeologist, found a black granite stele in Luxor. It had been part of the funeral temple of Pharaoh Merneptah, son of Ramesses II, who reigned from 1213 to 1203 BCE. It contains 28 lines of text describing Merneptah's victories over various enemies and concludes:

- Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe
- Ashkelon has been overcome
- Gezer has been captured
- Yano'am was made non-existent
- Israel is laid waste [and] his seed is not.

The stele can be dated to 1207 BCE. And while the hieroglyphics indicate that Ashkelon, Gezerr and Yano'am were cities, Israel is written with hieroglyphics that show the Egyptians regarded them as a people. With their name ending a list of towns in Canaan, it is clear that the scribe associated the Israelites with the territory of Canaan. We thus have clear evidence, and a date, from which we know that the Jewish people were in the land that they would eventually go on to make their own.

The Merneptah stele on display in Cairo Museum

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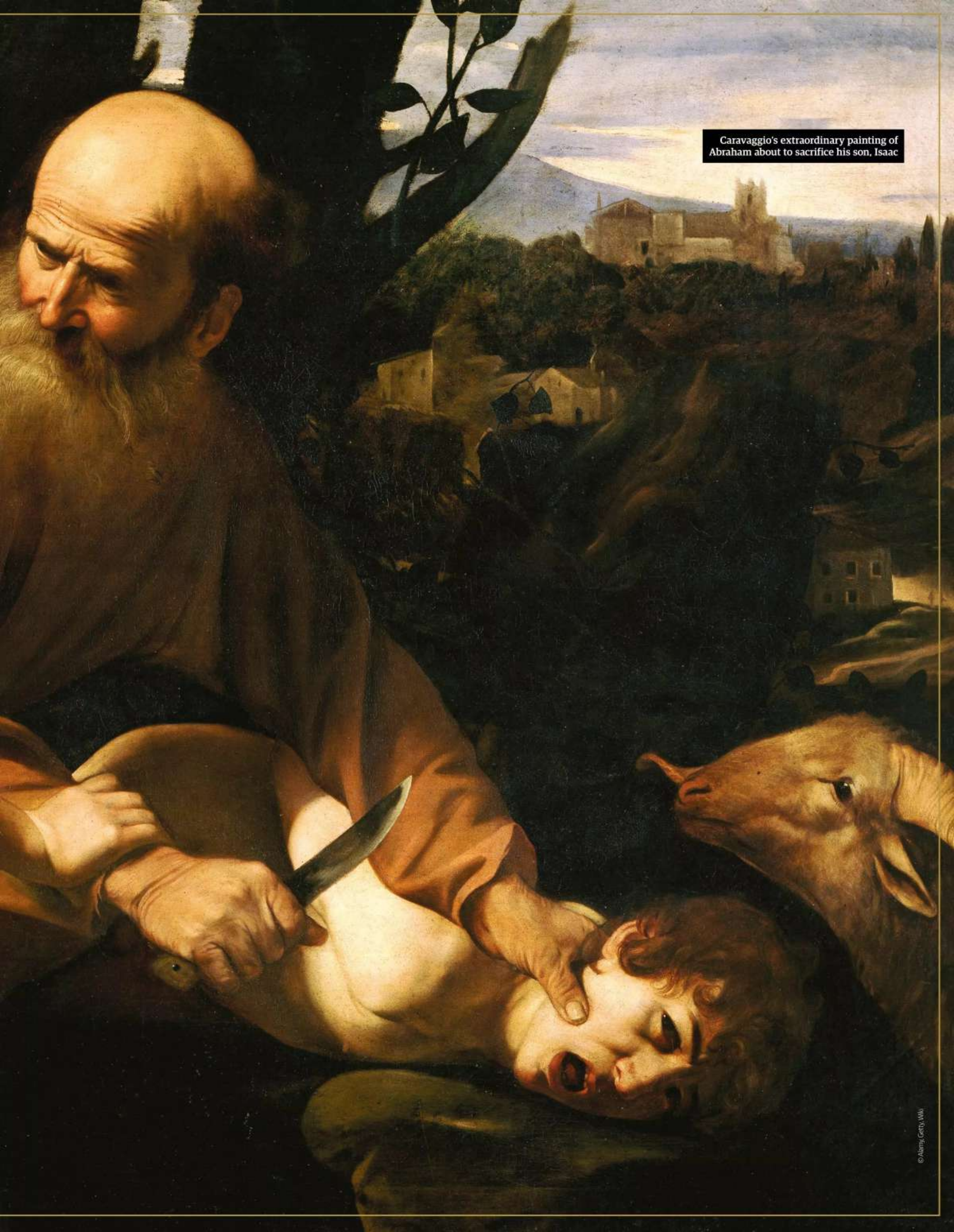


Caravaggio's extraordinary painting of Abraham about to sacrifice his son, Isaac

© Alamy, Getty, Wiki

MEN OR MYTHS?

The history and archaeology behind some of the key figures in the Bible

Words by Edoardo Albert

The Bible, the greatest story ever told - at least according to golden-age Hollywood - is a great story in part because of the extraordinary people within its pages. But what is the truth behind these characters? Did they actually exist at all and, if so, were they really like the people portrayed in the Bible? A great deal of historical and archaeological research has gone into these questions over the last century, and no figure has attracted greater attention than the man whose story lies at the roots of the Jewish people: Moses.

MOSES

"Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" - Deuteronomy 34:10.

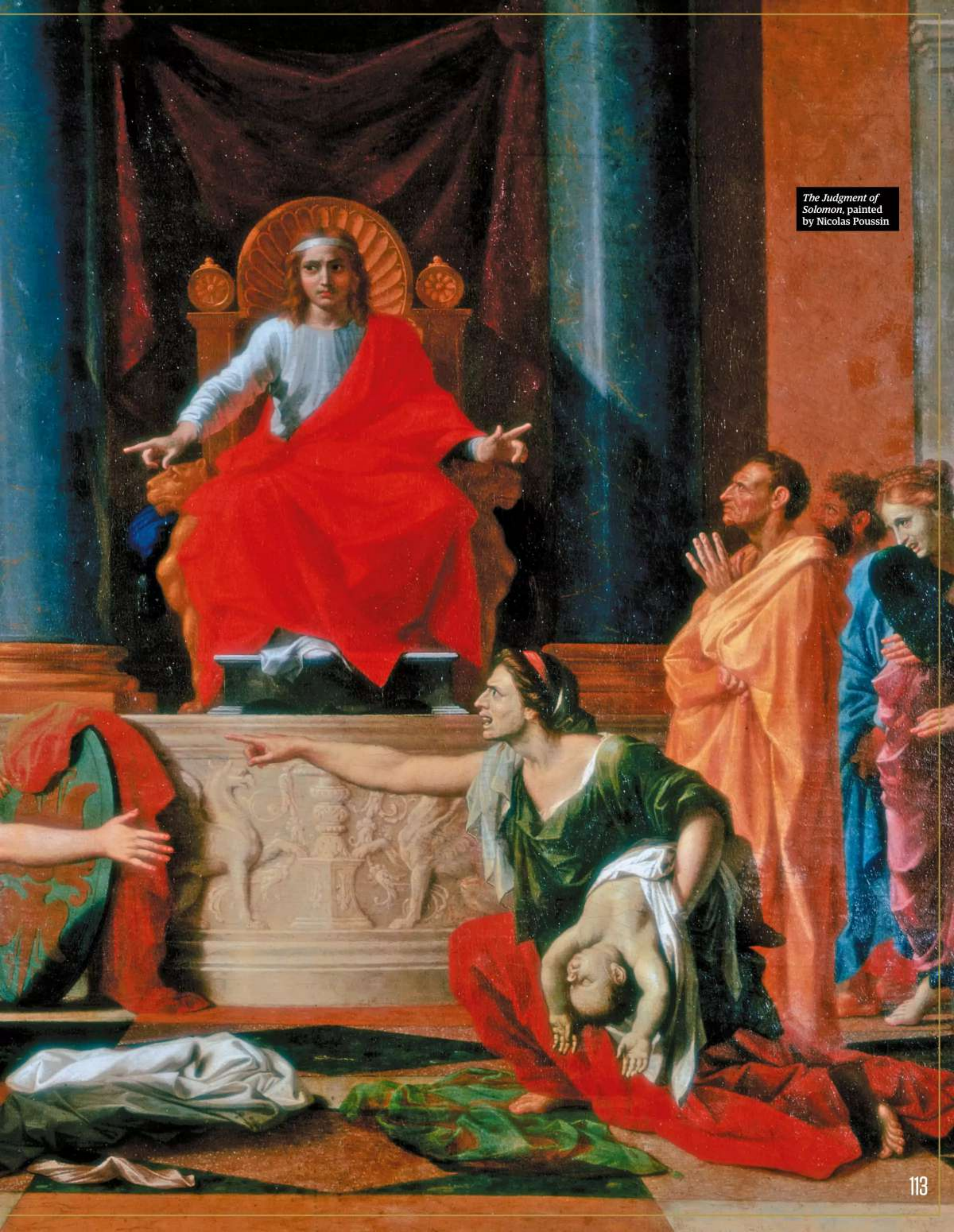
The second most commanding figure in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, after only God himself, is Moses, the man raised as Egyptian royalty who returns to his people and leads them to freedom amid the signs and wonders worked by God, bringing them eventually, after many years wandering in the wilderness, to the land promised them by God. Indeed, so commanding a figure is he that for over 3,000 years - in the longest continually enacted ritual in human history - Jews have celebrated seder, the Passover meal, during which the youngest person at the table asks, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" as the family gathers for a meal of bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

But if Moses looms so large in the Bible, does he figure elsewhere? Is there any trace of him in the hieroglyphic records of Egypt, or are there any archaeological remains in the wilderness through which he led his people? The answer is no. At least to present, there has been no evidence for Moses found outside of the Bible. This has led those scholars who work on the assumption that there is no historical truth in the Bible to regard Moses as a mythical figure, a magnetic narrative focus upon whom stories accreted in a manner similar to the way tales grew up around King Arthur.

But of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It would only take one find among the many ongoing excavations to bring this particular scholastic paradigm crashing down, in the same way that the discovery in 1993-94 of a stele mentioning David discredited the idea that was being advanced at the time that King David was also a mythical figure.

However, without outside evidence, we are dependent on the Bible to understand Moses. Fortunately for us, however, the Bible's record of its major figures is full of incidents that, by any normal historical analysis, we have to take seriously from the principle of embarrassment: that which casts a heroic founder figure in a poor light is far more likely to be true than further superlatives placed upon an already vaunted hero. But the Bible's account of Moses is so complex, so full and so strange that Moses, as a man, is brought present to us in a way that no other individual of such antiquity is.

Moses is no ordinary man. Everything about him tells of a man set apart, from the people he was chosen to lead as much as from the Egyptians who



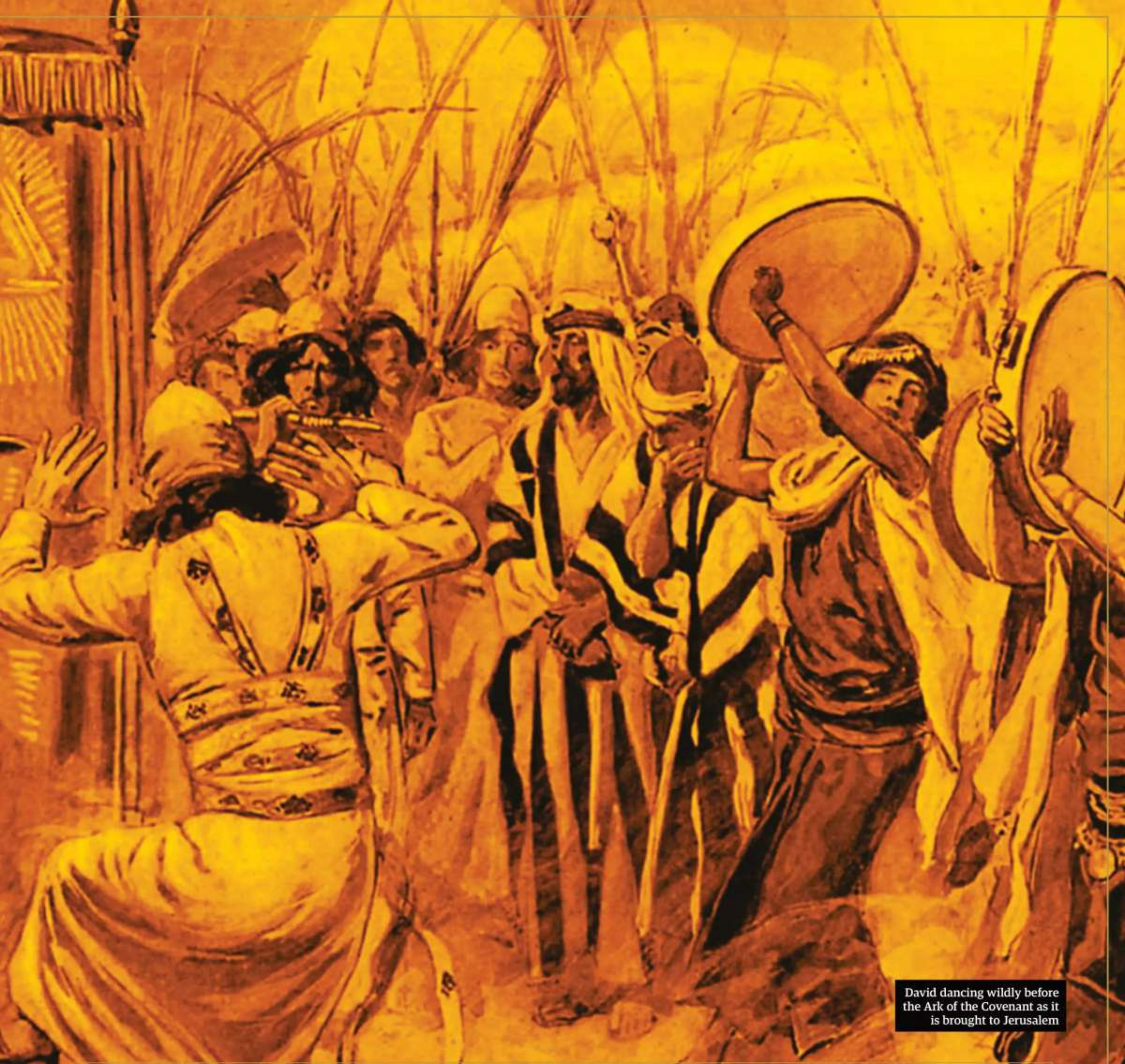
The Judgment of Solomon, painted by Nicolas Poussin brought him up, for that is the first notable aspect of this great foundational figure of the Jewish people: for a Jew, he was very Egyptian. Moses' very name tells of the Egyptian milieu of his upbringing - in written Egyptian, which like a number of other languages does not transcribe vowels, 'ms' means 'born of'. It's a very common element of Egyptian names: Tuthmosis (born of Thoth) and Ramesses (born of Ra) are examples. Moses could mean 'born of water [the Nile]'.

However, the familiar story of Moses being cast adrift on the Nile in a basket and being found and raised by the daughter of pharaoh bears a suspicious resemblance to the ancient king Sargon of Akkad, who was also supposedly cast upon the River Euphrates by his mother in a basket of rushes sealed with bitumen until being found by a drawer of water. As Sargon reigned in the 24th and 23rd centuries BCE, long before Moses could have lived, it must be suspected that this tale was adopted in the Mosaic narrative at some point.

While the Bible makes some pains to emphasise Moses' Jewish lineage, a number of scholars, most famously Sigmund Freud, have suggested that he really was an Egyptian prince who turned on his father and adopted the Jews as his own people. Moses' status as an outsider is further affirmed by his actions when first going into exile. Rather than fleeing, as one might expect, to Canaan, the land of his ancestors (assuming Moses really was of the line of Abraham), Moses goes to Midian, which probably lay in Sinai. What's more, while there he marries a Midianite woman whose father is a priest. But the Midians did not worship the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They worshipped Baal. Indeed, Moses' own sister and brother later challenged him on this, only to be sharply upbraided by no less an authority than God himself.

Thus even against his own blood family, Moses was a man set apart. In this, he resembles the people that he led through the wilderness: the Jewish people through all their long history have been a people set apart, marked out from other nations, as Moses their leader was set apart from his own family and people. But perhaps that is the fate of a man of whom God says: "When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face - clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord" (Numbers 12:6-8).

Even in death, the paradoxical nature of Moses' mission is made clear. God had assured him the Promised Land, in clear fulfilment of the commitment made previously to Abraham and the patriarchs. The normal pattern of the biblical narrative up to this point is that of promises made, delayed but ultimately kept. God keeps his word, but to Moses, he does not. Not only is Moses not allowed to enter the land towards which he has brought his people, but he is not even permitted to be buried there, as the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their spouses were. Instead



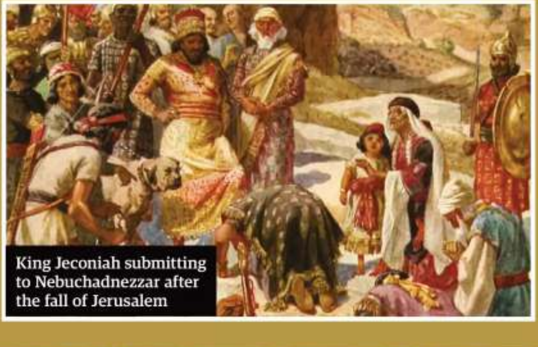
David dancing wildly before the Ark of the Covenant as it is brought to Jerusalem

JECONIAH, KING OF JUDEA

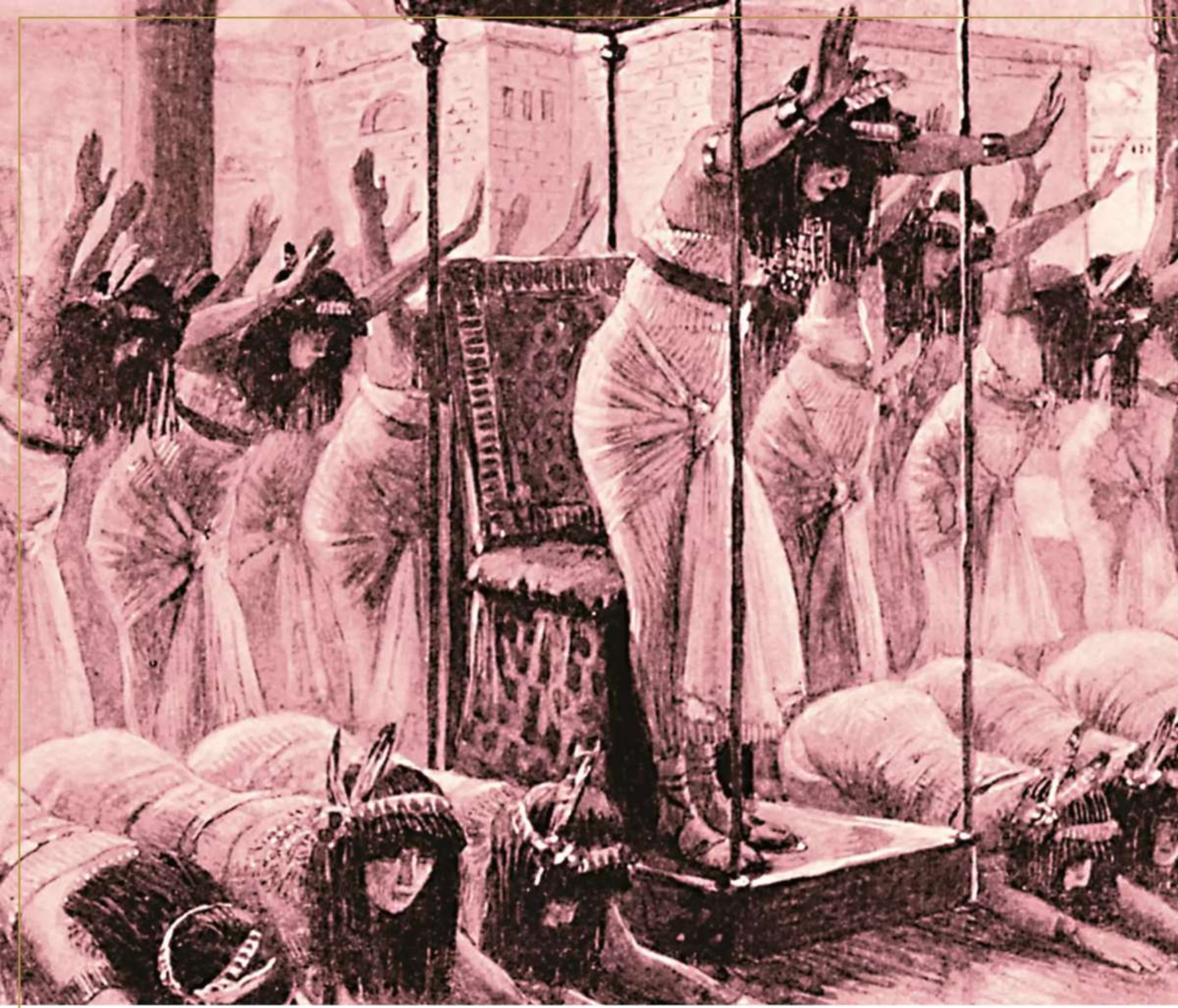
The king who lost Jerusalem

Poor King Jeconiah. Coming to the throne of Judea at the age of 18 (or possibly eight) after his father was killed, he found himself the object of the not inconsiderable wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, who arrived outside Jerusalem with a huge army in the winter of 598 BCE. The siege did not last long - Jeconiah surrendered and on 16 March 597, Jerusalem fell. Nebuchadnezzar carted the king, his family and all the valuables that could be looted from Jerusalem back to Babylon. There, Nebuchadnezzar kept Jeconiah and his family as hostages, but they were well looked after. A cuneiform tablet excavated in the 20th century turned out to be the ration requisition chit for the hostage king and his entourage:

"To Ya'u-kinu [Jeconiah] king of the land of Yahudu [Judea], 26 pints [of oil] for Ya'u-kinu, king of the land of Yahudu, 3¾ pints for the five sons of the king of the land of Yahudu, 6 pints for eight men, Yahduites - for each one and three-quarters of a pint."



King Jeconiah submitting to Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem



Moses, perhaps the most towering figure in Jewish history, whether he be real historical figure or mythical exemplar of the destiny of his people, dies without ever crossing the Jordan and is buried in an unknown grave by God's hand alone - "He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day" (Deuteronomy 34:6).

While the historicity or otherwise of Moses remains an open question in scholarship, there is no more compelling and complex character to be found in the literature of ancient times. If Moses be myth, his myth is as much apart from the normal run of story figures, as if he was truly a man, he was a man set apart from all others.

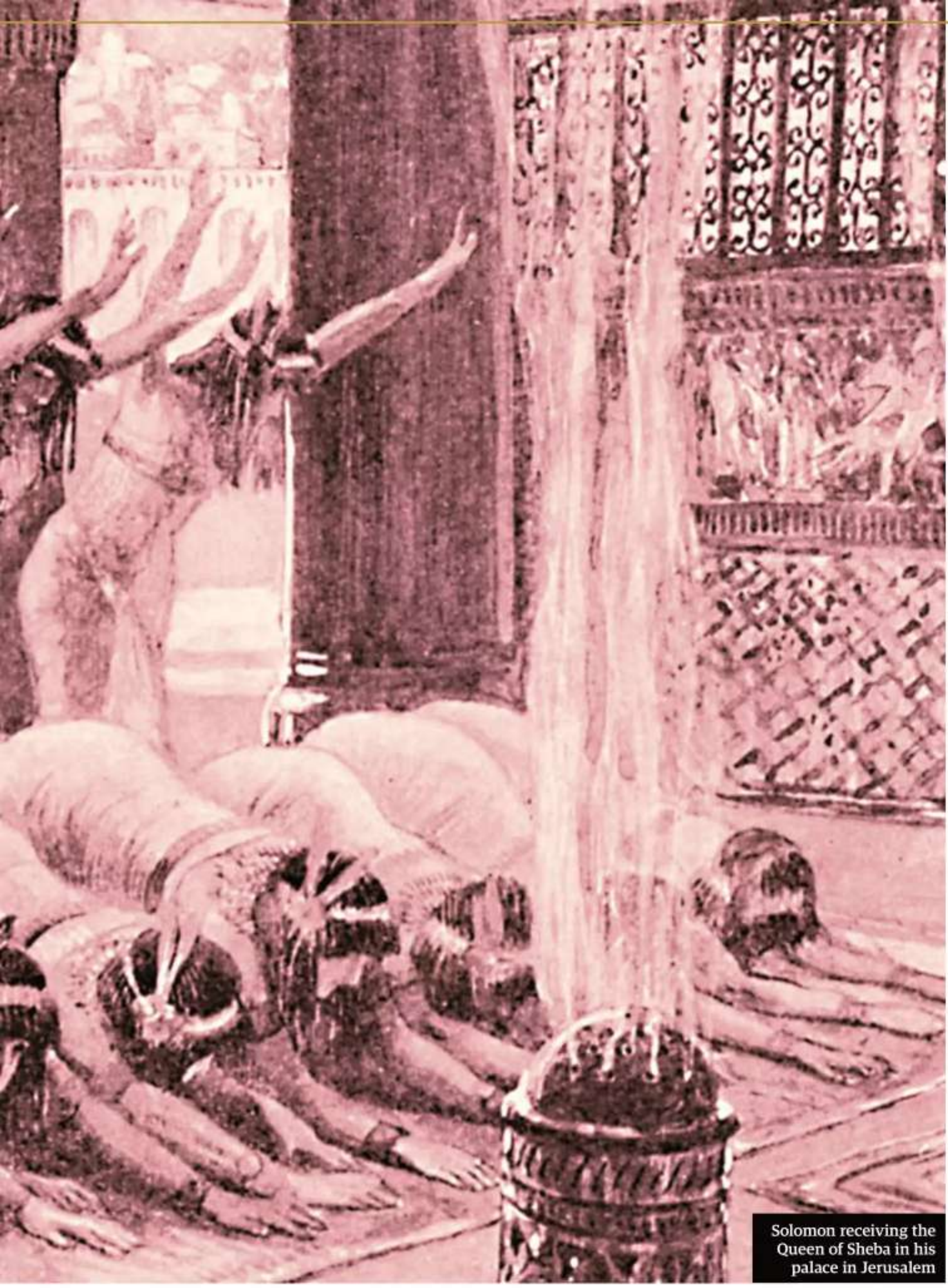
DAVID

If Moses is the man set apart, then David is the man who exemplifies the poetry, glory and pathos of the human condition. But as with Moses, scholars taking a minimalist position on the Bible's historical value had confidently consigned David to the status of mythic figure - a composite heroic figure who had attracted colourful tales to him with all the narrative gravity of a 10th-century BCE Robin Hood. For these scholars, the lack of archaeological or historical evidence for David's existence was proof that he had never existed.

So it was a little embarrassing for them when a stele was discovered in Tel Dan in the Golan Heights that mentioned David in 1993-94. Although broken into three pieces, it carries the boasting of one of the greatest enemies of kingdoms of Israel and Judea, the Aramean king Hazael, stating: "I killed Jehoram son of Ahab king of Israel and I killed Ahaz-iahu son of Jehoram, king of the House of David." Clearly, if there is a House of David, then there must have been a David, and a David well enough known to be engraved into a memorial stele carved around 796 BCE by an enemy maybe 200 years after his death.

Still, while "House of David" might seem clear evidence that an actual David was involved, somewhere along the way, scholars - many of whom are tied as strongly to their intellectual positions as a limpet is to a rock - took to the pages of academic journals to argue, quite seriously, that the David in question was not a person but a place. The assertion was received with perhaps more politeness than it deserved, but it is slowly being consigned to the black pit of forgetting that is the fate of failed academic theories.

However, while it is now generally accepted that David really existed and founded a royal line that bore his name, what about his kingdom? Biblical minimalists fell back to the position that David's kingdom wasn't much of a kingdom after all. Rather than the glorious state that treated with neighbouring powers as an equal and that, under David's successor, King Solomon, built the first Temple in Jerusalem, it was basically little more


Solomon receiving the Queen of Sheba in his palace in Jerusalem

"CLEARLY, IF THERE IS A HOUSE OF DAVID, THEN THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A DAVID"

than a backwater, a collection of a few villages with minimal population and as much culture as you would expect from a bunch of goat herders. One scholar described the Davidic kingdom as "500 people with sticks in their hands shouting and cursing and spitting". It's a far cry from the David portrayed in the Bible, who led the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and danced in exultation before it, singing his joy and despair in many of the Psalms recorded in the Bible.

These confident assertions were based on there being little archaeological evidence for a functioning state in Israel in the 10th century BCE. However, new finds come to light and new excavations are slowly revealing a picture of a functioning state from the late 11th century BCE onwards. In particular, the excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa, around 30 kilometres from Jerusalem, have revealed an impressively fortified site, identified as the Biblical city of Shaarayim ('two gates') that did indeed have two gates. The fort that occupied the site was destroyed sometime between 1018 and 948 BCE, and was never reoccupied, so it must date to the time of kings David and Solomon. It was a formidable settlement, with a casemate wall, two gates and two plazas, houses, warehouse and a central palace. Having only existed during the reigns of David and Solomon, it must have been built at their command, so the two kings must have had the authority and the manpower at their disposal to do this. Such building projects are not going to be undertaken by 500 people with sticks.

As for Jerusalem, it was David who conquered it and made it his capital. Jerusalem was ideally situated at the centre of the scattered Jewish tribes, but it had never been conquered by any of them, enduring as a Jebusite settlement protected by the natural geography that makes Jerusalem an eminently defensible site. But David managed to take the city and it's likely he did so with a typically brave and ingenious stratagem. The key requirement for a city to survive a siege, particularly in a hot climate, is access to water. To ensure such access, the Jebusites had dug a 122-metre shaft through the bed rock to Gihon, a spring that flowed just outside the walls of Jerusalem. The shaft was rediscovered in 1867 by a British army engineer, Sir Charles Warren. It was part of a complex tunnel system that allowed the Jebusites to draw water from a new-found pool fed by the Gihon Spring. David and his men found these secret tunnels and used them to infiltrate and capture the city.

As founder of the United Monarchy, David is one of the most revered figures in Jewish history. Notwithstanding this, the Bible does not shy away from some trenchant criticism of him when he did wrong. Such stories, so different from the unrelieved hagiographies of other ancient cultures to their kings, are among the most likely to be true of David. Thus when David developed a passion for the beautiful Bathsheba, wife of his general Uriah, he deliberately ordered Uriah to the most dangerous part of the battle line in the hope that he would be killed. When Uriah did die, David immediately added Bathsheba to his already large collection of wives and concubines.

But then Nathan the prophet came to David and, in parable, told him of how a rich man had robbed a poor man of his most valued lamb. David, indignant, called down judgement upon that man, only for Nathan to tell David that he was that man, who had stolen Uriah's wife and sent a faithful general to his death. Such a remonstrance would not be recorded in other ancient annals because anyone saying such a thing to an Egyptian pharaoh or a Babylonian king would have had a life expectancy only slightly longer than the king's command to execute him. But not only did Nathan survive, David also admitted his sin and repented.

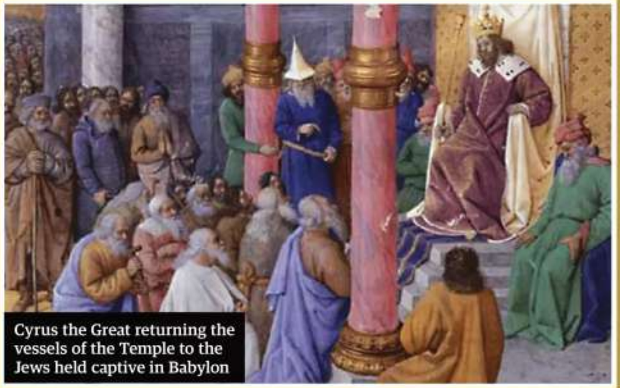
This is not the only occasion when David's behaviour is questioned in the biblical account of him, for when he ordered the Ark of the Covenant be brought to Jerusalem, "wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14). Even his wives thought these sort of antics extraordinary, with one of them remonstrating, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!" (2 Samuel 6:20).

CYRUS THE GREAT

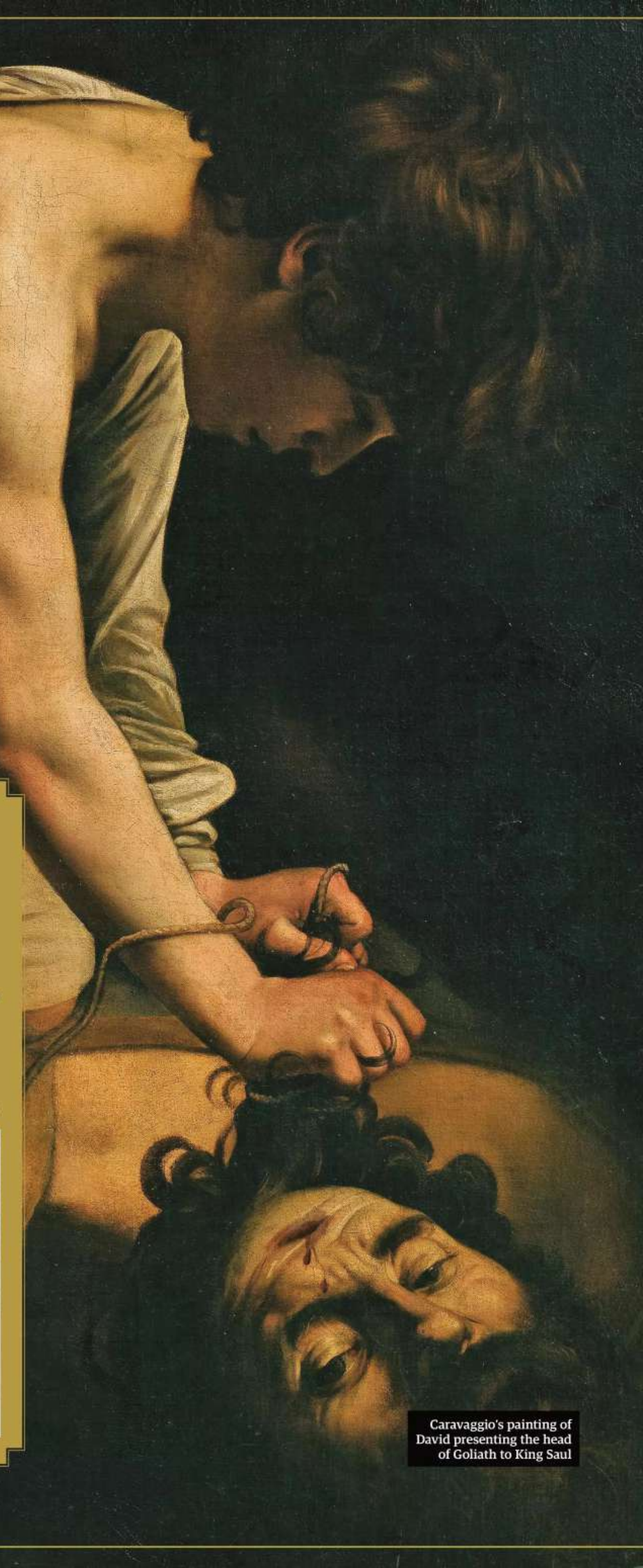
Giving Jerusalem back to the Jews

Most peoples disappear when dispersed into exile - the Jews did not. During their time in Babylon, they remained a distinctive people. Then, in 539 BCE, 54 years after the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem, Babylon fell to the army of Cyrus the Great. In the Bible, Cyrus is unreservedly praised, and this appears justified as he behaved with magnanimity to those he conquered. A cuneiform cylinder in the British Museum declares: "I entered Babylon as a friend... My numerous troops walked around Babylon in peace. I did not allow anybody to terrorise... I gathered up their one-time inhabitants and returned them to their homelands."

Cyrus seems to have meant what he said in these proclamations and the Book of Ezra concurs, telling how he encouraged the Jewish exiles to return home. To encourage them further, he even gave back the Temple gold and silver that had been looted. But it would take many years to actually rebuild the Temple, with the foundations only being laid in 516 BCE, when Darius had replaced Cyrus as emperor.



Cyrus the Great returning the vessels of the Temple to the Jews held captive in Babylon



Caravaggio's painting of David presenting the head of Goliath to King Saul

In 1986, a plaque was found at the same site that yielded the 'House of David' stele, showing a man playing a lute, wearing a short tunic and dancing wildly. The plaque is old, probably from around 1300 BCE, so well before David, but it matches closely the description of David dancing ecstatically before the Ark of the Lord.

All of these details come together to create a portrait of a fascinating, complex man. And while David's first son with Bathsheba died, their second survived, and would grow into a man no less fascinating than his father.

SOLOMON

David's successor as king has become a synonym for wise and wealthy rule. Under Solomon, according to the Bible, the kingdom of Israel reached a peak of power and influence in the wider world, while in Jerusalem Solomon embarked on the most significant building venture in Jewish history: the construction of the First Temple. Surely this should have left considerable historical evidence outside the Bible?

The initial assessment, that led some scholars to doubt the very existence of a kingdom ruled by David and Solomon, was not really. Up to the present, there have been no verified archaeological finds to confirm the reign of King Solomon - but then, the same applied to David until the discovery of the Tel Dan stele. It's more than likely that something will be unearthed in the years to come, particularly in light of the fact that an unprovenanced royal seal has been found, bearing the name of Solomon. But because the seal was looted before being sold on to collectors, thus removing it from its archaeological context, it's unfortunately not possible to accept it as historical proof of Solomon's existence.

So without direct historical proof, we need to look at the more general evidence for what was happening in the period to see if that gives any insight into Solomon's existence and activities. Looking for the sort of projects that leave remains, the Bible says that Solomon expanded Jerusalem and built the First Temple with the help of craftsmen provided by his ally, King Hiram of Tyre, that he embarked on a major building programme of towns and cities, and that he built a port on the Red Sea to harbour the merchant fleet that brought the riches of the world to his court.

There is considerable evidence elsewhere in Israel for major building works during the putative reign of King Solomon in the 10th century BCE. In Megiddo, in the north, the city boasted three palaces, impressive casemate walls and six-chambered gates flanked by guardrooms that parallel the designs of the gates to the cities of Hazor and Gezer. For all three cities to have similar structures dating from the same era suggests very strongly a powerful, centralised monarchy employing a cadre of royal officials to oversee building works.

Not only were cities being built in Israel, but fortresses were constructed on its borders as protection. One of these was "Tamar in the wilderness" (1 Kings 9:18), which lies south of the Dead Sea. Excavations here have uncovered a massive fortress, with walls exceeded only by those of Jerusalem. What's more, an Israelite king also built a line of forts to defend the kingdom from an approach across the Negev Desert. The most likely candidate is Solomon.

But what of Solomon's fabled wealth and splendour, the "gold of Ophir" with which he adorned his kingdom? This was the fruit of trade conducted by the "fleet of ships at Ezion-Geber, which is near Elath on the shore of the Red Sea in the land of Edom" (1 Kings 9:26). Archaeologists have found a likely location for such a port in the island of Jezirat Faraun. The small island lies only 274 metres from shore and is entirely surrounded by an ancient wall of the casemate type favoured by fortress builders during the putative reign of Solomon, with a sheltered harbour on the landward side. Solomon was an ally of Hiram of Tyre, a Phoenician king whose city commanded trade routes in the eastern Mediterranean. Having an alliance to a monarch with access to a Red Sea port would have opened up the vast and extraordinarily lucrative markets of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to the Phoenicians. Acting as middleman between the Phoenicians and the Indian Ocean markets, Solomon was in the perfect position to rake in the gold.

Much of that gold went to building and adorning Solomon's most famous building project, the Temple. The dimensions ascribed to the Temple in the Bible sound quite reasonable for its era: 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide and 30 cubits high (31 metres by ten metres by 15.5 metres), so it was a substantial building but not vast. Of course, being built on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the most contested city on Earth, the archaeological examination of the area has to be conducted with great delicacy. What's more, the Temple itself was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BCE, then the area where it stood was levelled to accommodate the Second Temple.

Despite all these difficulties, the evidence now suggests that Solomon expanded Jerusalem to include Temple Mount, doubling the size of the city at a stroke. Examination of the area around Temple Mount (the Muslim authorities that control the Mount keep the area off-limits to archaeologists) has revealed 10th-century structures, including part of a royal palace. With such finds apparent, it is a reasonable supposition that the 10th-century builders also built a temple on Temple Mount.

So while there's no historical evidence for the more colourful stories surrounding Solomon, such as his famous judgement, and while there's as yet no direct, provenanced extra-biblical evidence for his existence, archaeology has revealed the work of a ruler who built the buildings and towns the Bible reported Solomon to have built. So if another king was responsible, he was a king so like the biblical Solomon as to make no odds.

THE BIBLE'S MAIN CHARACTER

The Bible spans thousands of years, but one character dominates it

There is one personality that dominates the Bible above all others: God. He is there from its beginning to its end. He is the warp around which the thread of first human, and then Jewish, history is wound. He is the agent and actor, the audience and the critic of the most dramatic tales. The character that emerges is at once the simplest and the most complex ever portrayed in literature: august yet intimate, beyond understanding yet seeking to be known.

According to biblical scholars, the God of the Bible is the result of four different sources that came together to produce the text that we know today. They came to this conclusion by considering a number of factors, starting with the different names ascribed to God. For example, in Genesis 1-2:3, when God creates the Earth in the seven days of creation, he is named 'Elohim' in Hebrew, which means 'gods'. But in Genesis 2:4 to 2:25, the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, God is YHWH, the Tetragrammaton, the God who names himself, "I am who I am."

This alternation continues in Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, and from it, as well as other clues, scholars have concluded that there were originally different versions of these stories that were wound together into the multifaceted God that speaks in the Bible.

"The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" - Genesis 1:2

THE LIFE OF JESUS

One workman's monumental impact on history

Words by Edoardo Albert

Did Jesus exist? Yes. Although there have been attempts to cast Jesus as a mythical or literary character, no serious scholar now accepts the idea of a fabricated Jesus. Leaving aside the Gospels for the moment, what evidence is there for the existence of an obscure Jew living in 1st-century Palestine, which is definitely not the sort of person who normally figured at all in contemporary discourse? The answer is actually quite a lot. Writing circa 116 CE, the Roman historian, Tacitus, touches on the subject. In his account of the rumours that circulated in Rome blaming the Emperor Nero for starting the Great Fire in 64 CE, he describes how Nero shifted the blame onto the 'Chrestians', a cult that followed one Christ who had been executed by the Roman official, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius.

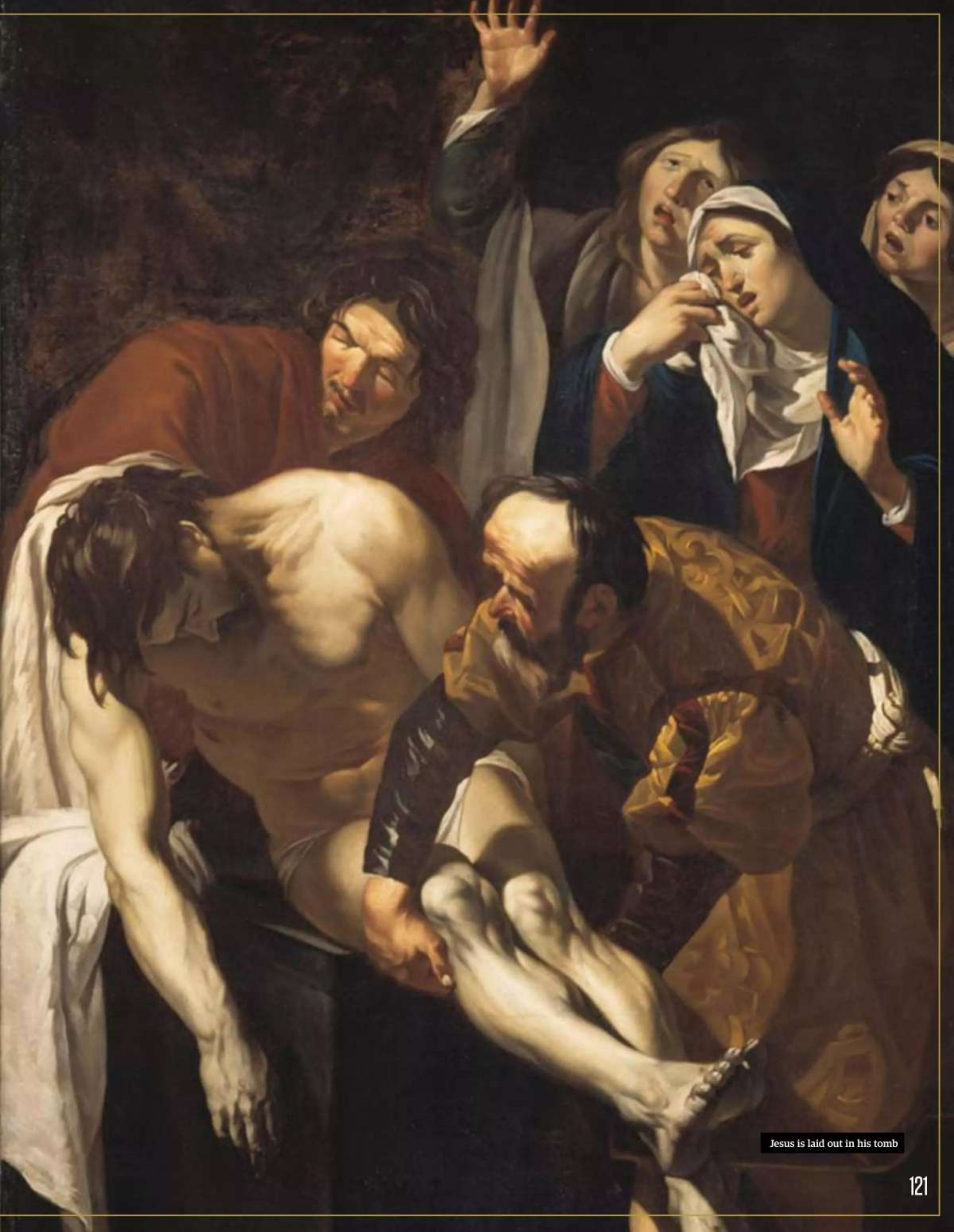
The Jewish historian, Josephus, writing under the patronage of the Roman emperors, also mentions Jesus, twice, in his work *Antiquities Of The Jews*. The second reference is to the execution of James, the "brother of Jesus who is called Messiah"; this is uncontroversial. The first reference, known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*, is longer and more detailed but has clearly had text interpolated by later Christian copyists. However, taken with the second reference, it's solid non-Christian evidence for the existence of a Jewish teacher called Jesus. Indeed, working solely from Tacitus and Josephus, it's possible to say that Jesus existed and his name in Aramaic was Yeshua, of which Jesus is the Greek version; he was called by some the 'Messiah', or Christos in Greek; he had followers among Jews and Gentiles; he was opposed by Jewish leaders; and that the Roman governor, Pilate, ordered his execution, by crucifixion, and that this happened between 26 CE and 36 CE.

In addition to these two historians, Jesus is also mentioned, in greater or less detail, by other ancient writers. The 2nd-century satirist, Lucian of Samosata, mocked all belief in the supernatural; that of the Christians whom he satirises in his work *The Passing Of Peregrinus* no less than that of followers of traditional Roman religion. The mix of ideas that Lucian lampoons as typically Christian in his work suggests he used sources other than the New Testament and Christian writings, most likely contemporary pagan appraisals of this new cult. Celsus, a 2nd-century Platonist philosopher, argued that Jesus was a magician who tricked people with his powers. Jesus and his followers are also mentioned in a letter of Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan written circa 112 CE, and in Suetonius's thoroughly scurrilous and hugely entertaining *On The Lives Of The Caesars*.

It's also worth noting that no ancient author ever argued that Jesus did not actually exist. Even in the most heated arguments between Jewish and pagan writers and early Christians, neither the rabbinical nor the Classical authors suggest that Jesus was a mythical figure: whichever side of the argument they were on, there was agreement that they were talking about a man who had walked the dusty roads of 1st-century Palestine until his unfortunate elevation upon a tree. So yes, Jesus existed.

ARE THE GOSPELS RELIABLE?

Here we move on to the question of the reliability of the Gospels as records of Jesus' life and teaching. Many scholars have argued that the Gospels are theological documents, presenting a religious argument in a narrative, historical form. Furthermore, these scholars argue, the Gospels were written to cement the claims to leadership in the nascent church of those who could claim to be the key witnesses to Jesus after his death: Peter, John, Paul. This is Christianity as small-group politics, the sort of struggle for power that you will find in parish councils and social clubs. Only, this was a small



Jesus is laid out in his tomb

church social club that expanded the story of its making to take in much of the world.

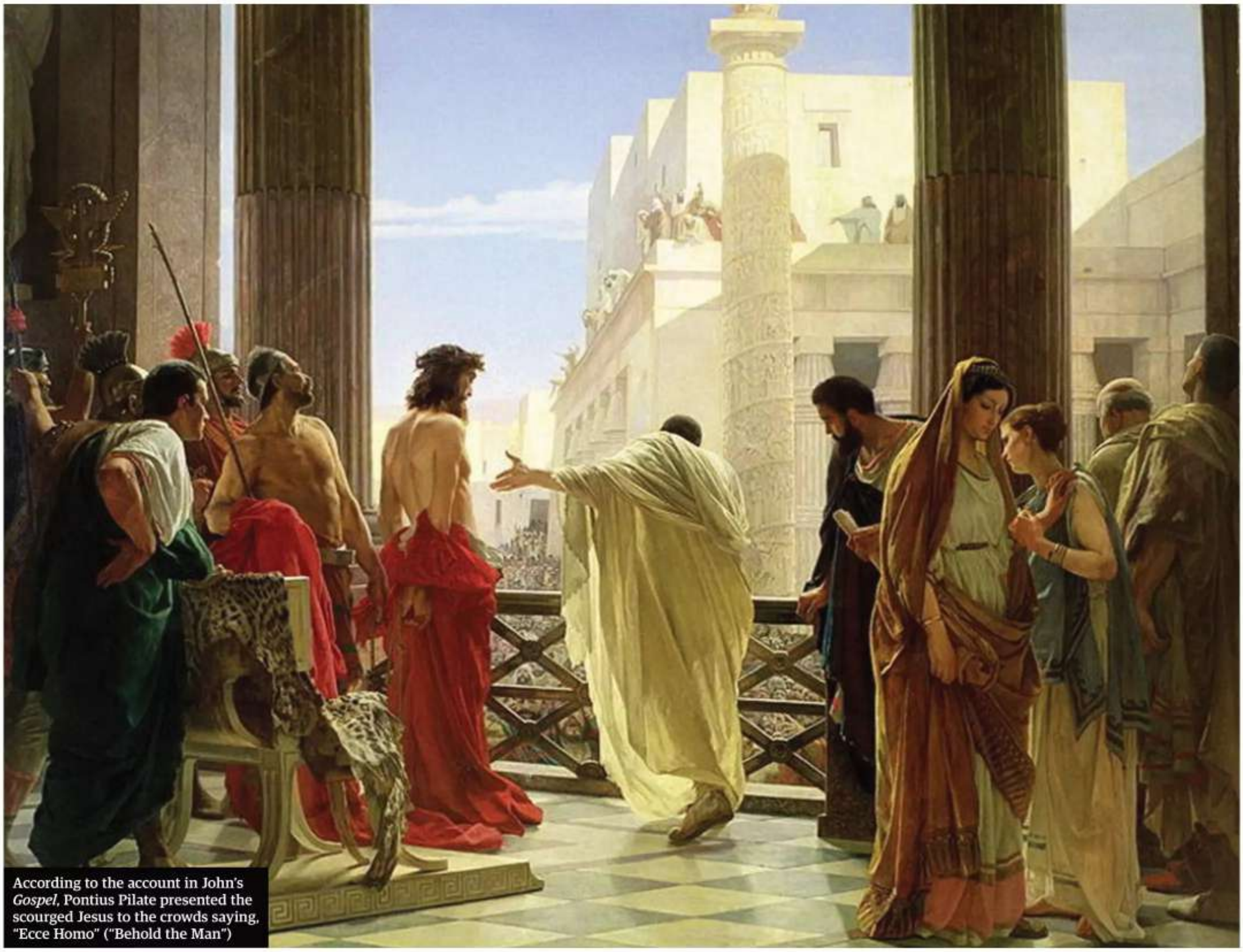
However, recent groundbreaking scholarship argues that the *Gospels* are in fact testaments, the records of direct, named eyewitnesses as to the events of Jesus' life, rather than the products of an oral tradition passed along by many anonymous sources until eventually they were written down. By this view, the early Christian community cared deeply about exactly what Jesus had said and done, and specific eyewitnesses (including the 12, although not limited to them) told their stories of what Jesus had said and done, and these stories were valued precisely because they were told by eyewitnesses who could vouch for their veracity. This was the model of the first Christian communities, which only began to change a few decades later, when these eyewitnesses began to die off. The Gospels were written then to preserve this eyewitness testimony and, to indicate this to future readers, they were framed to say so, being written in accordance with the best sort of history of the time, which valued the evidence of people who had participated in the recorded events more highly than anything else.

Of course, whether the evidence of these witnesses is credible is another matter entirely, and one that has much more to do with the readers' view of the possibility or otherwise of events outside everyday occurrences. But of the internal reliability of the Gospels, that is how well the original text was copied and passed on at a time when every book had to be laboriously written out by hand, there can be no question. There are vastly more copies of the Gospels in existence than of any other work from ancient history. Julius Caesar's account of the Gallic War survives in 250 manuscripts of which the earliest dates to the 9th century, so 900 years after the work was written. By comparison, there are nearly 6,000 manuscript copies of the Gospels, with the oldest (a fragment but an accurate fragment) dating to around 130 CE, so around half a century after the gospel was first written. By any normal rules of historical analysis we would have to say that the Gospels are nearly contemporary accounts of the teaching and actions of a Jewish religious leader. Indeed, by those rules we would have to say they provide a more reliable record than many historical texts whose contents are not doubted.

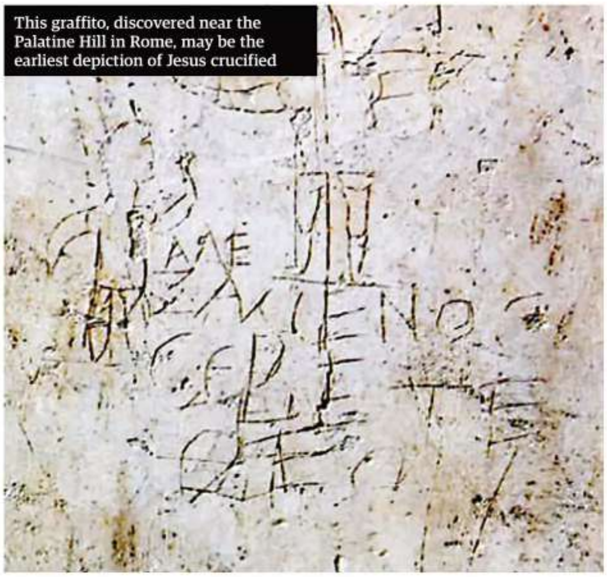
WHICH GOSPELS ARE THE MOST CREDIBLE?

Firstly, the parts that were most troubling or embarrassing to the Church. A general historical principle is that the difficult, troubling or even downright disturbing parts of the historical record are the most likely to be true. As the Church

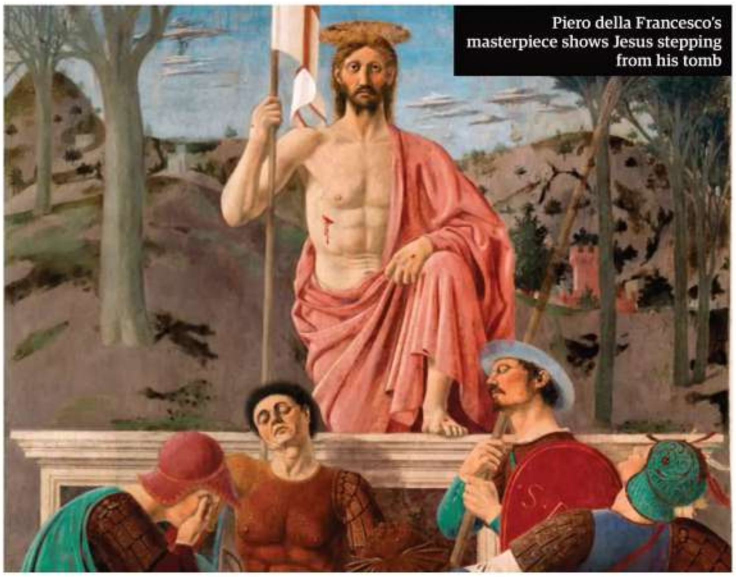
"RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ARGUES THE GOSPELS ARE TESTAMENTS"



According to the account in John's *Gospel*, Pontius Pilate presented the scourged Jesus to the crowds saying, "Ecce Homo" ("Behold the Man")



This graffito, discovered near the Palatine Hill in Rome, may be the earliest depiction of Jesus crucified



Piero della Francesco's masterpiece shows Jesus stepping from his tomb

developed its understanding of Jesus and his mission, and set about establishing a worked-out theology, some aspects of the Gospels sat much more easily with this than did others. For instance, at the start of his ministry, Jesus seeks out and accepts baptism from John the Baptist. But why should Jesus, without sin according to the Church, need baptism, which is a rite of repentance? Similarly, the first witnesses to Jesus after his resurrection were women. But women were not regarded at the time as being reliable witnesses, their testimony not even being accepted in legal cases. That women should be recorded as the first to encounter Jesus after his resurrection makes it very likely that this was in fact the case, and the Gospel writers simply recorded the testimony that they heard exactly as they heard it, rather than trying to finesse it to the particular sensibilities of the audience of their time.

Furthermore, those parts of the Gospel where Jesus says or does something that stands outside or in contradiction to the Judaism of his time are most likely true, examples ranging from his turning the moneychangers out of the Temple to the injunction to love your enemies. Where incidents and teachings in the Gospels are attested in multiple sources, both among the Gospels and in the epistles and other early-Christian and non-Christian writings, then these are historically supported.

Putting all these together produces considerable historical support for large tranches of the Gospels, particularly after the infancy narratives, which are only recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke and in very different forms in each. But for Jesus' ministry, and the events around his arrest, trial and crucifixion, there is more than enough evidence to consider the Gospel accounts as accurate accounts of what happened while bearing in mind the limitations of personal eyewitness testimony.

TRIAL AND CRUCIFIXION

During its long history, the Roman Empire crucified tens of thousands of people. The Empire imposed peace and order within its borders, but it was a peace built on power, and cemented by terror. Crucifixion was a punishment designed to humiliate and destroy, to expose the dying to their own impotence in the face of imperial might, and to remind all those watching - and crucifixion was always a public spectacle - what the power that had consigned the dying man to the cross might do to

THE TOMB OF JESUS

Where Jesus was laid to rest

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was buried in a tomb carved into the rock outside the walls of Jerusalem (Jewish law forbidding burial within the city). But the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which contains the Aedicule that is said to mark the site of Jesus' tomb, lies within the city walls. However, historians have shown that the walls were extended after Jesus' death. To repair damage to the Aedicule, restorers opened it for 60 hours in 2017. The limestone bed on which Jesus was supposed to have been lain has been covered in marble since at least 1555, but the restorers removed the cladding to examine what was beneath. The church itself has been attacked, suffered earthquakes, and been completely rebuilt after it was destroyed in 1009 by the Caliph Al Hakim, whose men attempted to destroy the tomb by fire. Could anything have survived? Hidden beneath the marble cladding was another, older marble slab, marked with a cross, resting on top of a long shelf cut into the limestone. The mortar used to fix the lower marble into place has now been dated to 345 CE, the time when Emperor Constantine ordered the construction of a church over the reputed site of Jesus' burial. As the first emperor to allow Christian practice within the Roman Empire, Constantine sent men to Jerusalem to seek the site of Jesus' burial. They were told it lay beneath a pagan temple that the Emperor Hadrian had ordered built on the site following the Jewish revolt from 132-36 CE. The church historian, Eusebius, recounts how the pagan temple was razed and a rock-cut tomb found beneath, around which the church was built. Despite the vicissitudes of the centuries, it is now clear that the Aedicule marks this spot.

The bare limestone exposed when the marble slab protecting it was removed from the Aedicule in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Was this where Jesus' body was laid after his death?

“IS THERE EVIDENCE TO SUGGEST THE ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENED IN THE GOSPELS IS ACCURATE?”

them. The Romans reserved such punishments to themselves. Only the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, might command such a death and so the Sanhedrin brought Jesus to Pilate so that he might be subject to the full spectrum of imperial might. Or at least that is what the Gospels say and they are the only extant account of Jesus' trial before Pilate, Roman imperial historians not being particularly concerned with the execution of slaves and non-Romans. But how accurate an account do the Gospels give of the proceedings?

There is vigorous debate today among scholars as to the historicity of the Gospels' account of Jesus' trial by Pilate, with a significant number of writers arguing that the events, as presented by the evangelists, are not historical but rather the result of the bitter split in the latter part of the 1st century between the Christian Church, composed of Jews who accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah and Gentiles not required to accept the Mosaic law, and Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah. According to this view, the role of Pilate in the trial and condemnation of Jesus is downplayed and the blame shifted on to the Jewish people in general and the Jewish authorities in particular. Thus, the main movers in the plot to arrest and try Jesus are the Jewish high priest and his council, while Pilate is presented, in the Gospel accounts, as being somewhat reluctant to hand over for execution a man in whom he can find no guilt. According to this view, the Gospels are essentially theological and sectarian in their accounts of Jesus' trial before Pilate, and their value as a historical record of what actually happened should be discounted.

With this in mind, how much credence can we give to what the Gospels say about Jesus' trial before Pilate? The argument for the accounts being completely ahistorical fails on the first count because Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas, the Jewish religious authorities, are historical figures, attested in records and archaeology. Indeed, Caiaphas, the High Priest, is so historic his very bones have been found, in an ossuary discovered in 1990 in Jerusalem. However, the more serious charge is that the account of the trial has been slanted to exonerate Pilate - and by extension, the Roman authorities - and to place the blame on the Jewish people. Is there any evidence to suggest that the account of what happened in the Gospels is accurate?

There is. Josephus, the Jewish historian, in his book *The Antiquities Of The Jews*, tells of a trial by the Sanhedrin, and execution by a reluctant Roman governor. Only this trial took place in 62 CE, the Roman governor was Albinus and the leader of the Sanhedrin was Ananus, son of Annas and brother-in-law of Caiaphas. And the man on trial was James, "the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ". This account, by a historian with no link to the new Christian cult, parallels the accounts in the Gospels and suggests that it was certainly possible for the Jewish authorities to make use of the Roman imperial power to rid themselves of troublemakers.

Furthermore, Josephus shows that the main actors in the condemnation of James were the Temple authorities, as indeed do the Gospels in their account of Jesus' trial, not the wider Jewish population. Indeed, when Jesus is led to Golgotha, the place of execution, the (Jewish) population of Jerusalem followed, weeping at what was about to befall him.

JESUS' CHILDHOOD HOME

Have archaeologists discovered the house where Jesus grew up?

In Nazareth, archaeologists have uncovered the carefully preserved remains of a house that was later venerated as the place where Jesus grew up with his family. The remains were found on the site of the Sisters of Nazareth Convent, across the road from the Church of the Annunciation that traditionally marks the place where Mary conceived Jesus. Archaeologists began examining the site in 2006, and swiftly found remains stretching back many centuries, including successive Byzantine and Crusader churches. But what was of greatest interest was the structure that the churches had been built to enclose, and had thus preserved. It was a courtyard house, cut from the limestone as it sloped towards the valley below it, and it could be securely dated to the 1st century through the datable pottery found in it. Fragments of limestone vessels suggest the people who lived here were Jewish, since limestone containers could not become impure and as such were very popular with the Jewish population. The surrounding churches had been carefully built to protect and preserve the building over which they were raised. In the 7th century, a pilgrim to Nazareth described a church raised over the site of Jesus's childhood house, which was subsequently lost. Professor Ken Dark and his team have probably found it again, although we cannot say for certain whether those early church builders had identified the correct house.

The excavated remains of a rock-hewn courtyard house in Nazareth that, archaeologists believe, may have been the childhood home of Jesus

DEATH BY TORTURE

The accounts of Pilate, in the Gospels and secular histories, agree that he was, above all else, a political fixer: principles or the life of an innocent man made no odds before pleasing his master in Rome. To that end, Pilate was more than prepared to sacrifice an innocent man to preserve his career.

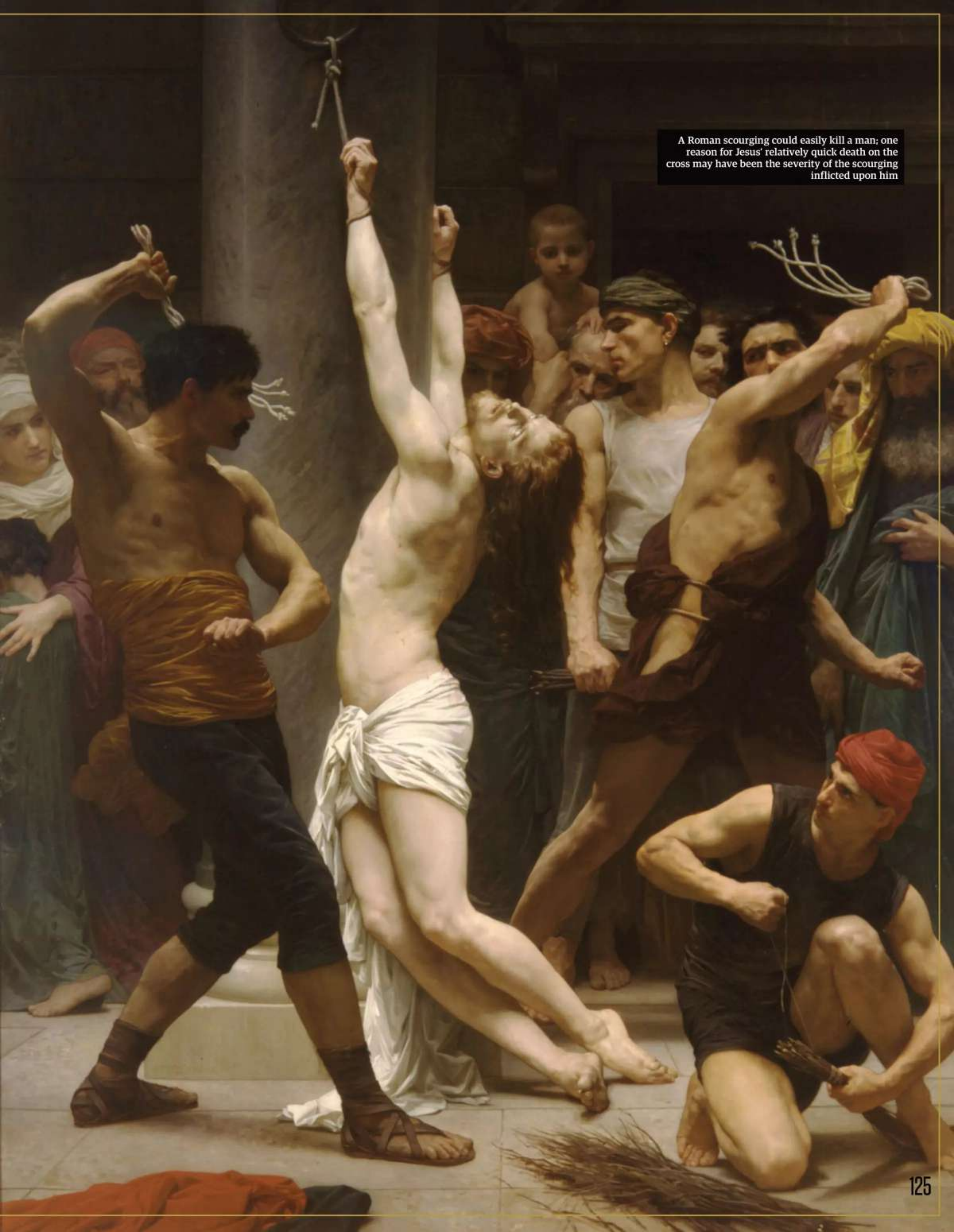
But first Pilate had Jesus whipped. The Gospels pass over this in a word. However, Roman scourging was designed to rip not just the skin but to tear the flesh from a man's back. The whip was multi-thonged and set with metal. The worst scourges, called scorpions, had hooks. Two soldiers, each armed with a whip, generally alternated strokes, the thongs curling round the body and savagely pulling out strips of flesh.

After such a punishment, it is little surprise that Jesus could not manage to carry the crosspiece of his execution all the way to Golgotha, the place of the skull, where the upright would have been set, waiting for its load of dying flesh. The soldiers escorting him grabbed a hapless passer-by, named Simon of Cyrene (a city in north Africa, near the present-day city of Shahhat in Libya), to carry the crosspiece for Jesus.

There, outside the city walls, the execution squad nailed Jesus' arms to the crossbeam, hammering the nails between the radius and ulna above the wrist rather than through the palm of the hand (a nail through the hand would simply rip through the flesh under the weight of the body). The nail also cut the median nerve, producing the characteristic crucifixion clench, where the little and ring fingers are fully flexed, the middle finger partially extended, and the index finger fully extended (severing the median nerve caused excruciating pain as well, to go with all the other agonies of crucifixion). This hand position has become a gesture of benediction within the Christian Church, although historians are not sure whether it derives from Jesus' crucifixion or has another source.

Contrary to the modesty accorded to Jesus when he is depicted on a crucifix, in reality the soldiers executing Pilate's sentence stripped him naked before nailing him to the cross. Humiliation was an intrinsic part of the punishment, and the dying man's clothes were spoils for the soldiers.

Although the Romans crucified tens of thousands of people, only one victim has been excavated. In 1968, the ossuary of Jehohanan, the son of Hagkol, was found in Jerusalem with an iron nail driven



A Roman scourging could easily kill a man; one reason for Jesus' relatively quick death on the cross may have been the severity of the scourging inflicted upon him through the heel bone. Jehohanan had probably had his feet nailed individually to the sides of the upright, with his arms being tied over the crossbeam. There he would have hung, until slow asphyxiation killed him.

Nailed to the upright, above Jesus' head, was the justification for execution: the king of the Jews. Pilate executed him on the legal grounds that he was a rebel against the Empire and had set himself against the emperor. Of Jesus' many followers, only the women, and the source of John's gospel, remained with him: the rest fled or were in hiding. Some of his accusers came out of Jerusalem to mock him. Never ones to miss the opportunity to drive home to the crowd the message that opposing the Empire meant the most dreadful of deaths, the Romans crucified two other men alongside Jesus.

Crucifixion - from which we derive the word 'excruciating', literally meaning 'from the cross' - was an agonising death, but how long the actual dying took depended on a number of factors. These ranged from how the victim was attached to the cross, through to his health and age, to how severely he had been whipped before being crucified. Jesus, it would seem, had already been whipped most of the way towards death for he did not last that long on the cross. Some six hours after he was nailed up, he died. It probably didn't feel a short time to him, though. The execution squad, to confirm he was dead before allowing the body to be taken down, drove a spear into his chest.

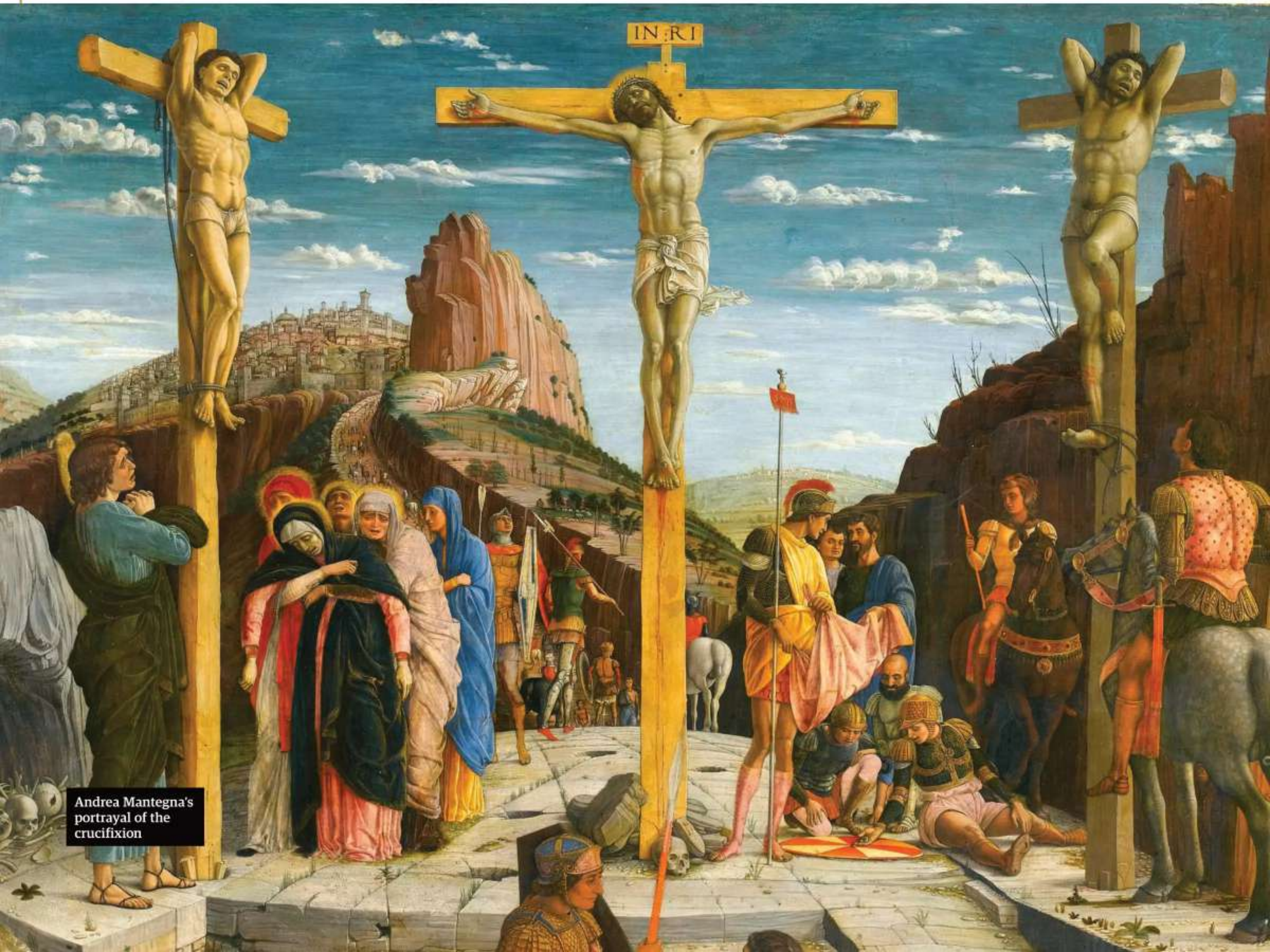
Having received permission from Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two members of the Sanhedrin who were appalled at its decision to seek the execution of Jesus, took the body of Jesus down from the cross, wrapped it in a shroud and hurriedly laid the corpse to rest in a cave cut into the rock nearby. They had to hurry, for the Sabbath, timed from just before sunset, was drawing near. They laid Jesus in the tomb and sealed the cave with a rock, rolling it into place.

And that was that. Another Messiah dealt with. Another rebel executed. Pilate could go back to the baths and theatres and gymnasia of Caesarea, where he normally dwelled. The Temple authorities could carry on in charge. It was all over. Death was the great tool of the rich and the powerful to keep control and they had wielded it well. Everything was back to normal.

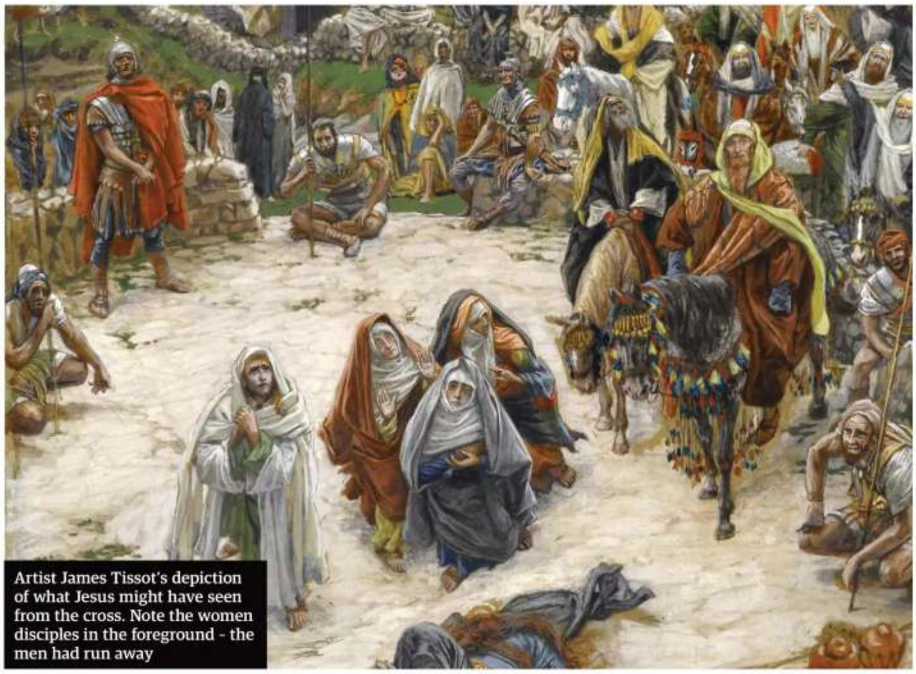
THE EMPTY TOMB

Jesus was probably executed on a Friday, his body taken down from the cross and hurriedly buried in a stone tomb just outside the city before the start of the Sabbath at sunset. On the Sabbath, no work was allowed, so the body rested, untended, in the tomb, the blood of crucifixion and scourging crusting the corpse. Then, on Sunday, the third day, Jesus' most devoted and bravest followers, the women, went early to the tomb in order to wash and anoint the body, then dress Jesus properly for death. Only to find the tomb empty.

At this point we leave history and enter something much more strange. The accounts in the Gospels of what happened are fragmentary, confused and confusing: the accounts of people who did not know what to make of what was happening. Jesus' disciples had scattered, taking cover so that they did not get caught up in the aftermath of his



Andrea Mantegna's portrayal of the crucifixion



Artist James Tissot's depiction of what Jesus might have seen from the cross. Note the women disciples in the foreground - the men had run away

death. A couple of them, after the Sabbath was over, decided to head north, back to the relative safety of Galilee. On the road north out of Jerusalem to Emmaus they fell in with a stranger and started speaking with him about the recent events in the city. Reaching Emmaus, they asked the stranger to stop with them, as the hour was getting late. Sitting at the table, the stranger broke bread with them and, doing so, the two disciples recognised him as Jesus, but then he disappeared from their sight.

This is typical of the recorded appearances of Jesus after his death: he is physical and corporeal, breaking bread, cooking fish, eating; he is sometimes recognised and sometimes not; he is able to pass through physical barriers and yet the marks of his death are still apparent on his body. No wonder the people who experienced this found it all but impossible to put into words. But they made no effort to try and make it make more sense, nor to hide the awkward fact that among the earliest witnesses were women - those unreliable witnesses whose testimony was not acceptable in a court of law at the time.

Paul's letters are generally accepted to be the earliest Christian documents that we have, and he records the appearances that transformed Jesus' followers from a frightened, leaderless rabble into something new:

"He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Cor 15:5-8.)

Note that Paul, writing to a mixed Gentile and Jewish community under Roman law in the Greek city of Corinth, does not see fit to mention the separate appearances to the women.

When coupled with the introduction to this record of Jesus' appearances after his crucifixion - Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and then that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15:3-4) - we have the core belief of the early Christians (although at this point they were not called, even by themselves, Christians, but rather followers of the Way). This is the story that they went out into the Empire and the world to preach. They were merely a bunch of fishermen, labourers, tax collectors and a tent maker from the fractious corner of the Mediterranean that polite members of society preferred to ignore. It may therefore come as no surprise that they found an initial audience from the lower strata of imperial society: the urban poor, women and the innumerable slaves whose labour maintained the elaborate structure of the Empire. According to tradition, all but one of the 12 Paul mentions in his letter to the Corinthians died in the course of telling this story, and Paul died too. It was quite some story for so many to die for it - and the reason they died for it was because they believed it to be true.

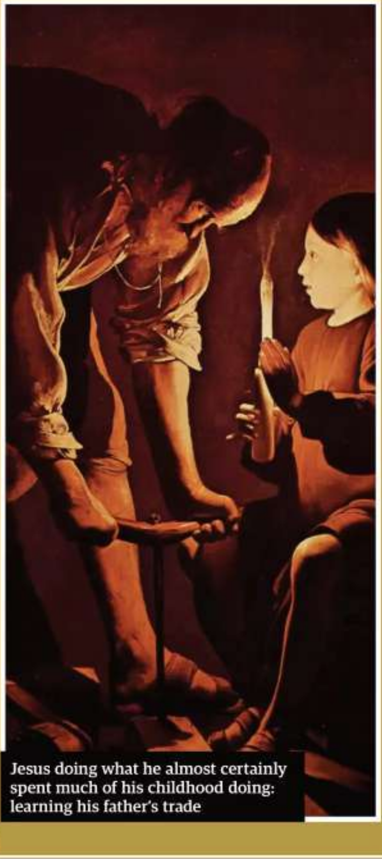
Of course, whether the evidence of these witnesses is credible is whole other matter entirely. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus asks his followers what the talk is on the street and in the towns about him, and they tell Jesus that some people say he is a prophet, and others that he is Elijah, or Jeremiah, or John the Baptist. "But you," asks Jesus, "who do you say I am?" Today, 2,000 years later, the question still leaps off the page with the same urgency, the same importance as when it was first posed.

"But you, who do you say I am?"

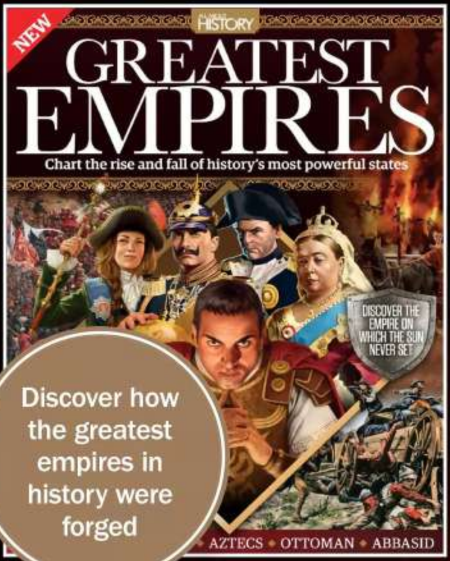
WHERE WAS HE?

What did Jesus do during his missing years?

From 12 to about 30 CE we know nothing of what Jesus did or where he lived. The Gospels say nothing. From such silence the religious imagination recoils, and the various apocryphal Gospels and writings spun tales to fill the gap. Later, as Arthurian romances drew Joseph of Arimathea into their orbit, having him bring the Holy Grail to Britain, which would become the object of the greatest quest of the knights of the Round Table, it was but a short step to imagining the young Jesus, apprenticed to Joseph, setting foot in Albion - from which we receive the first verse of William Blake's *Jerusalem*. The 19th century saw a number of scholars advance theories that the young Jesus had travelled to the east and studied with a varying cast of Hindu sadhus, Buddhist bhikkhus or Tibetan lamas. These ideas, although entertaining, have nothing in the way of evidence. As Jesus seems to have been known, before his ministry, as a tekton - a general craftsman - like his father, there is little reason to suppose he travelled any further than Jerusalem. And as the signal achievement of modern scholarship on Jesus has been to place him in his time and place, a 1st-century Jew, there is every reason to reject these theories.



Jesus doing what he almost certainly spent much of his childhood doing: learning his father's trade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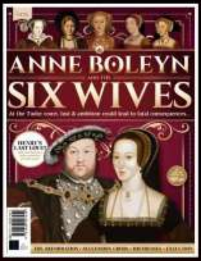
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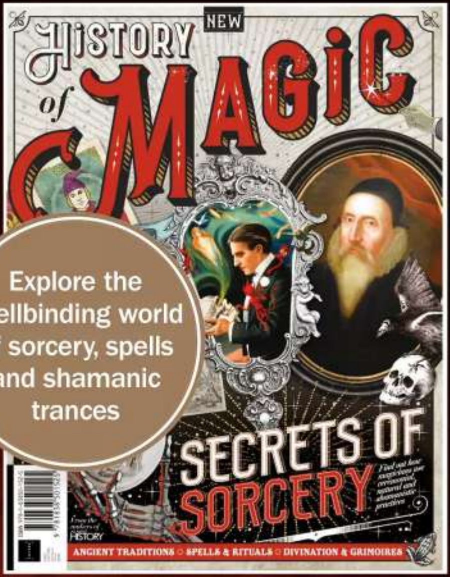
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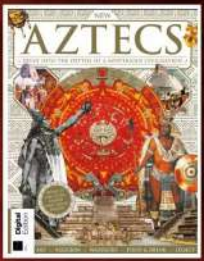

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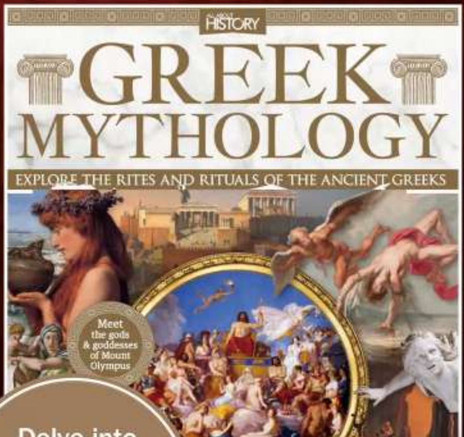
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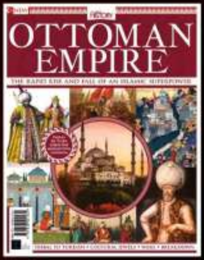
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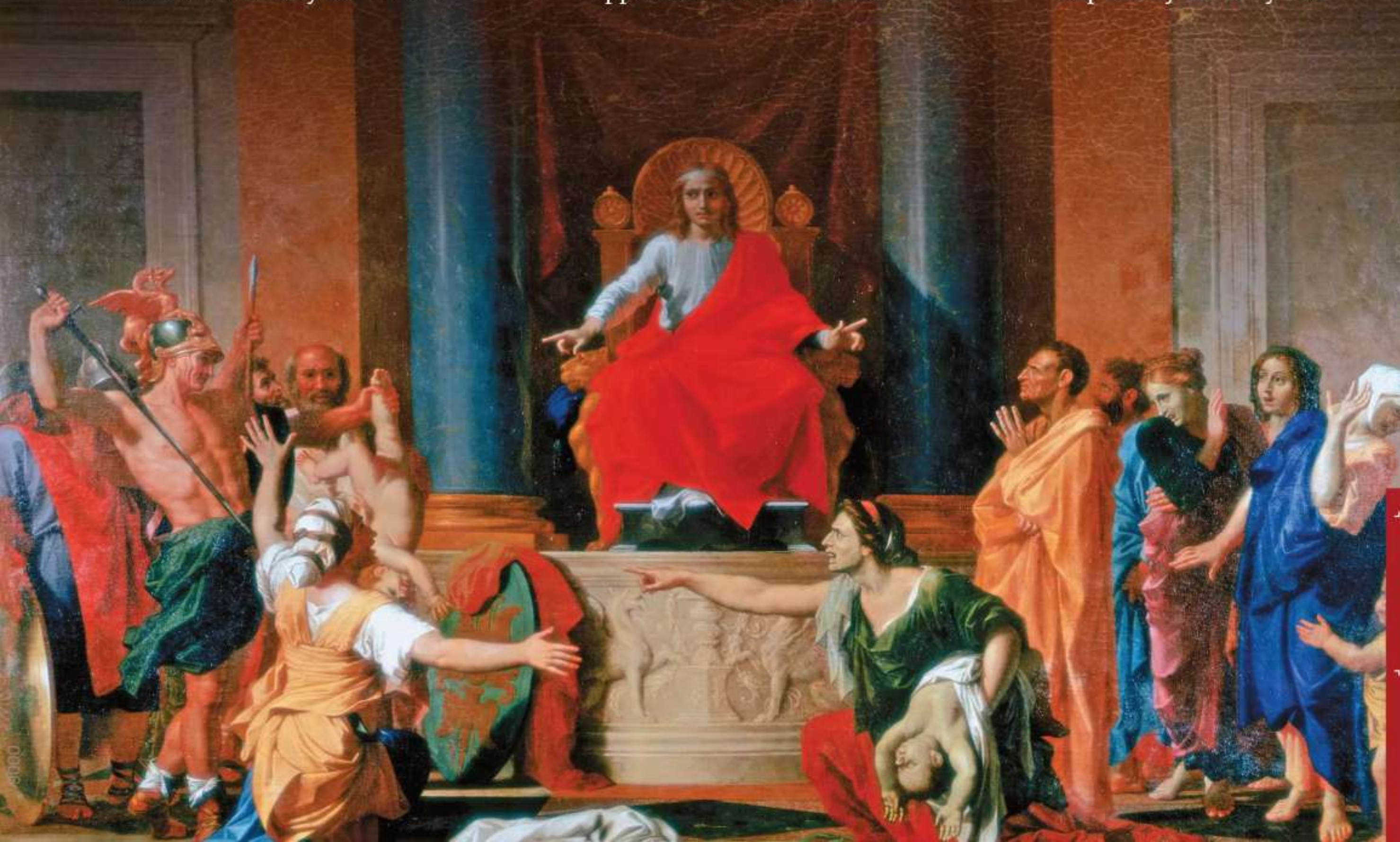

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